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or,
**The FALCON DETECTIVE'S
INVISIBLE FOE.**

BY JACKSON KNOX,
(OLD HAWK,)

AUTHOR OF "THE CIRCUS DETECTIVE," "OLD
GRIP," "THE HURRICANE DETECTIVE,"
"THE SPHINX DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE HAUNTING FACE.

"HORRIBLE—appalling!"

The exclamation was uttered in a low, rushed voice, and in a sort of prolonged gasp.

The speaker was a powerfully-built, black-bearded, Jewish-appearing man, past the middle age, who was standing in the Rogues' Gallery of the Chief Prefecture of the Paris Police, holding a beautiful little girl by the hand.

He had turned away with an involuntary shudder, but then once more confronted the photograph, which had called forth his exclamation, as if fascinated no less than repelled thereby.

IT WAS THE FACE OF GEORGE BROOKTON, THE THUG KING, THAT FALCON UNMASKED.

"Dreadful!" he continued, a little louder this time, though still half to himself. "A nightmare face, the face of a demon! Yes, its owner must in some way be mixed up with my fate, for the crime-written yet not unattractive face to thus shudderingly affect me. Leah, my dear, come; we will go, go, go!" And yet he still unaccountably lingered.

The child, thus designated, had at last looked up, a little puzzled, and perhaps somewhat sharing her protector's uneasiness as she caught sight of the portrait—the portrait of a handsome man of thirty odd, and yet of the born criminal, upon which Nature had already set her stamp of evil.

A pointed head, tigrish jaws, a thin-lipped, serpent-mouth, showing the sharp, saw-like teeth under the slight, silky mustache, eyes cruel and remorseless as assassin steel—a haunting face, just as had been declared—a terrifying face, the face of a human monster!

"What is it, grandpapa?" inquired the child. "Can't you find the portrait you came here to look for? And, what do you find to stare at in that wicked face? It isn't pretty at all; it makes me feel faint. Come, then; why don't we go?"

"A moment, dear, a moment!" And still he stared, fascinated and appalled.

They had spoken in Dutch, and yet one of the commissionaires, who now stepped up curiously, had caught their words understandingly.

"Can I be of service to monsieur?" he asked in French, and with French politeness. "Number 2197 seems to interest monsieur. A cosmopolitan rascal, that! Any particulars desired?"

The man addressed—the little Leah's 'grandpapa'—recovered his self-possession with a start, and bowed his acknowledgments.

"Thanks, Monsieur le Commissionaire!" he replied, in quite as good French as that addressed to him, though with a foreign suggestion, rather than accent. "You are good. What, then," with another weary glance at the photo, "Number 2197, you say? Ah, so I see by the tag in the corner, which had escaped me before. So much the worse," again half to himself, "so much the worse!"

"And why, may I ask, monsieur?" a little more interestedly.

"Do you not perceive then, that the number, 2197, is the second self-multiple of 13—the unlucky, the fatal number, the world over?"

"Humph!" slowly; "perhaps I do, now that you mention it, though I do not set up for a lightning calculator."

"Ah, a seeming bagatelle, but with perhaps the essence of destiny, perhaps of a malign misfortune, in its heart. First multiple, 13 times 13, with 169 as the result; second multiple, 13 times 169, and there you are with 2197, your criminal's number."

The commissionaire smiled. The foreign monsieur was quite evidently an eccentric, an original—like enough a superstitious ass, into the bargain.

"Any information desired, monsieur?" he asked again, with a somewhat commiserating shrug of the shoulders.

"Yes, if you please, monsieur. What is the original of this particular portrait?"

"A villain."

"Naturally, and *prima facie* at that."

"A multifarious villain, then—a criminal at large—une cosmopolite."

"Thanks; that is better. His name?"

"George Brookton, for one; perhaps there are half a hundred aliases, if monsieur would like to consult our registers."

"Thanks; not worth while. English, like enough?"

"Or American; but that is something no one knows."

"It is not material; he was under arrest here in Paris, then?"

"Of course, when forced to leave that memento—say, two years ago."

"The charge against him?"

"One on which he should have been guillotined on general principles; but one that could not be legally sustained—a charge doubtless brought against him in various parts of the world, many a time before, and perhaps since, but always with the same good luck for the prisoner. Lack of incriminating evidence."

"Heaven preserve us!"

"God is good, monsieur; at all events, the priests tell us so."

"And that charge was—"

"Murder for money, and always by the same means—strangling!"

"It is terrible!"

"I should say so! The face in the picture is, with the gratified air of producing a sensation, 'that of George Brookton, the Thug King—le Monarque des Etrangleurs!'"

"Horrible—appalling!"

The commissionaire was satisfied, no less than freshly curious.

"Pardon me, monsieur; but those were your exact words of twenty minutes ago, the over-hearing of which first attracted my attention to you."

"Yes; and why not? Thanks again for your courtesy, monsieur. Yes, dearie," to the child, "now we shall be going, *petite!*"

"Glad of it, grandpapa," was the child's pettish response, likewise in good French. "There is nothing pretty in this stupid place. Besides, I am a little hungry."

"Of your own courtesy, if you please, monsieur?" and the commissionaire laid a lightly detaining hand on the man's burly shoulder. "We are naturally curious here at the Prefecture, you understand. Besides, service for service—information for information is only fair, eh?"

The visitor hesitated, and then good-naturedly acquiesced, while drawing the little girl pettingly to his side, as a salve for her disappointment.

"As you choose, then, monsieur, he replied. "I am an honest man, with nothing to conceal."

"No doubt whatever of that, monsieur. You then permit me to question you freely, in return?"

"At your service, Monsieur le Commissionaire."

"Your finding this portrait of 2197 was a surprise to you? You did not come here looking for that?"

"You are right. Monsieur, a few points of my history are in order. I am a diamond merchant, Joseph Isaacstein by name, my home Amsterdam, my business carrying me constantly in various quarters of the globe; in fact, wherever diamonds are coveted and admired, which is everywhere."

"My enemy, one Max Gersacht, a specious, somewhat mysterious and wholly unconscionable scoundrel, has recently disappeared, after doing my daughter and only child—his miserable wife, and this child's unhappy mother—to death by his brutal treatment. He was a widower, with one little girl by a former wife, two years older than this one, his offspring by my idolized Rachel. The elder, in whom I had no special interest, disappeared with him in his flight, together with ten thousand francs' worth of my diamonds—my individual property, apart from that of the rich Amsterdam firm for whom I usually operate as their trusted agent. This child, Jehovah be praised! was left with me, secure from the scoundrel father's insatiable and corrupting clutch."

"There you have my explanation, Monsieur le Commissionaire."

"Something recently whispered to me that my unworthy son-in-law might all along have been a veteran criminal in disguise. Being in Paris for the first time since his flight, it occurred to me to look in upon your gallery here, with the possibility of confirming the suspicion."

"Failing in that, that face," pointing to No. 2197 with a scarcely repressed shudder, "unfortunately confronted me. I say unfortunately, for it will more than haunt me hereafter."

"More than haunt you?"

"Yes," uneasily. "It is in some way interwoven with my future—I feel it!"

"Monsieur is a fatalist, not to say superstitious," pityingly.

"Monsieur le Commissionaire is mistaken," with a first manifestation of asperity. "I am simply of a very impressionable nature, and—I know what I feel, which monsieur does not. I have the honor to wish Monsieur le Commissionaire a very good-day."

The commissionaire bowed, with an elevation of the shoulders that was yet more exasperating, and Mr. Isaacstein lost no further time in hurrying away, with his little girl.

He just noticed as he was quitting the Prefecture that he was being followed by a handsome, quiet-appearing young man, who had been reading a newspaper in the gallery, and might perhaps have overheard his conversation with the commissionaire, but that was all.

A little later on, and with the little Leah still in tow, Mr. Isaacstein was slowly forcing his way through a great and excited crowd in several of the streets at the foot of the Montmartre, where some political sensation was under way.

Then there was a sudden surging movement of the crowd, and the diamond merchant sunk back against a railing, with a helpless and bewildered cry.

The child had been suddenly wrenched from him and was gone!

A moment later, he perceived her being hurried away by a large man, whose back was turned to him, in the direction of a mysterious-looking *fiacre* standing, as if expectantly, at the comparatively secluded corner of an adjoining street, and yet was powerless for the moment to make a move or even cry out a second alarm, the first having apparently passed unheeded save by one man.

In this dilemma the latter touched the merchant reassuringly on the shoulder, revealing himself as the same quiet-appearing young man who had followed the couple out of the Prefecture.

"Remain just where you are, sir," said the young man, with something authoritative in his voice and manner. "I will restore the child to you instantly." And he darted away.

He kept his word, reappearing with the child in a few breathless moments, after having unceremoniously put her would-be abductor to flight.

"Here is my card," said the obliging stranger abruptly. "Give me your address and I will call on you in the course of the day."

Having obtained the desired address, he quickly mingled with the crowd, without waiting for the merchant's thanks.

CHAPTER II.

MERCHANT AND DETECTIVE.

MR. ISAACSTEIN was so much disturbed over this adventure that he did not think of looking at the card which had been thrust into his hand until he had reached his hotel, and thus placed his precious little charge out of harm's way.

Then he saw that it contained this address:

"MAJOR JACK FALCONBRIDGE,
"Private Detective,"
"New York, U. S. A."

"Humph!" he said to himself, "that name seems somewhat familiar to me, though I can't exactly place it. Ah, now I remember! Strange, our coming across each other in that odd way at the Prefecture, and the yet more fortunate meeting afterward! But then, I suppose he kept us in sight for his own reasons; and now, as ever, mysteriously unaccountable are the ways of Fate, Fate, Fate!"

For, Jew as he was by blood, and shrewd money-maker by profession, Joseph Isaacstein, with not a little of the mystic in his composition, was as thorough a fatalist as any Mussulman under the sovereignty of the Grand Porte.

Then, drawing to his side the little Leah, who was industriously devouring the contents of a new story book and a box of bonbons, as a dessert to the luncheon whose remains were still outspread upon the table at which they were sitting, he tenderly caressed the pretty head.

"How nearly I came to losing my little gazelle!" he murmured. "Tell me, didst recognize the ruffian who would have abducted thee?"

"Nay, grandpapa," was the careless response, made somewhat inaudible by the continued mastication of the sweets. "I was too frightened to take any note of the man. However, it was not my bad papa, I am sure of that. And when I might have observed him more attentively he was being whirled away in the *fiacre*, into which he had sprung like a monkey, after being sent reeling by the fist-blow of the handsome young gentleman who restored me to you."

Here "the beautiful young gentleman" himself was announced, and Leah dutifully slipped out of sight while her grandfather was receiving the visitor.

The latter, though accepting a proffered glass of wine, manifested a desire to cut short the merchant's profuse thanks and compliments with considerable abruptness.

"You noted my card, Mr. Isaacstein?" he asked.

"To be sure, sir," was the response. "And judge of my surprised delight, even apart from recognizing thereon the name of the great American detective whose distinguished services have more than once been employed by the great Amsterdam diamond firm of Van Ness & Teneycke, of which I am an accredited agent. Sir, you have placed me under a profound obligation."

"Enough of that, I beg of you!" with a nervous gesture, accompanied by an impatient glance from as piercing, magnetic a pair of eagle eyes as ever looked out of a human head.

"Until this morning, you were a perfect stranger to me, and it was through the sheepest accident that I chanced to overhear your conversation with the self-sufficient little commissionaire at the Prefecture."

"Neither chance nor accident, my friend," gravely interposed the merchant. "There is no such thing. Fate rules. There is naught but what is predestined."

"As you please, or let it go!" yet more impatiently. "That haunting face at the Rogues' Gallery—Number 2197, it seemed to impress you powerfully."

"Ah, good God, I should say so!"

"It is of the original of that portrait that I would speak with you."

"What a face! what a name! George Brookton, the Thug King—le Monarque des Etrangleurs!"

"Not a very agreeable personality, to be sure!"

"A monster, my friend—a fiend! But, tell me, was that man's identity the object of your own visit to the Prefecture?"

"Yes and no. Listen, Mynheer Isaacstein. I am temporarily in France at present on other business than aught connected with that mysterious master-criminal, though, from my past knowledge of his doings, I make a practice of keeping track of his evil record wherever he may chance to be."

"Ah!"

"This Brookton is a most exceptional criminal. There are already at least twenty murders to his private account, no one of which, such is his cleverness, has ever been legally brought home to him. Even now he is under no criminal indictment, and could scarcely be lawfully taken into custody, save on such grounds as his general infamous reputation would justify—a rather risky piece of business in these

days of false-imprisonment suits and charitably-inclined juries.

"But the criminal practices of this exceptional malefactor, are, nevertheless, under, way somewhere or another, more or less constantly. This is a certainty in detective circles the world over, and therefore the detective who may first succeed in tripping him up, red-handed, will be a fortunate man.

"Thus, sir, with many others of my profession, I always, no matter what other business I may be engaged in, keep the main chance of that possibility in view—the final bringing of the Thug King to justice."

"I understand, monsieur."

"Good, then! You, Mr. Isaacstein, may possibly aid me to that end."

"It's a little uncomfortably."

"Yes."

"Command me, then, I beg of you, Mr. Falconbridge."

"Thanks. You have a scoundrelly son-in-law, one Max Gersacht?"

"I should say so!"

"He is the father of your little granddaughter?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Might he have been her would-be abductor of this morning?"

"No; though I doubt not he is capable of such baseness. Leah did not recognize the ruffian."

"Ah! Another question, if you please. Might Max Gersacht, your scoundrelly son-in-law, and George Brookton, the Thug King, be one and the same?"

The diamond-merchant looked up with a suddenly paling face.

"Holy Abraham, no!" he exclaimed. "Impossible! What can have suggested such a thing to you?"

"Wait, and you will know. Now, what was it that so impressed you in the portrait of Rogue Number 2197 to-day?"

"I cannot describe it. A subtle horror, a mysterious conviction that its original was to be mingled with my fate!"

"Not also, perhaps, something in the face that reminded you of Max Gersacht's?"

Isaacstein started.

"Heavens, no! And yet—I don't know. God forbid!"

"You are a very excitable man."

"In a matter like this, my friend, yes. The deuce! I can see those pictured eyes now—that ominous brow, that remorseless mouth, those tigrish chops!"

"Try to be cool."

"Eh bien, I will try!" The conversation had thus far been in English, but was now partly in French. "Well, then, granting that there was a suggestion of my son-in-law's features in that pictured face, what then?"

"I will tell you. But first let me ask you who else, other than your son-in-law—your little Leah's father—would have been likely to interest himself in to-day's attempted abduction?"

"No one else. And yet, it could not have been he, for the child did not recognize him as such."

"Did she have a very good look at him?"

"No; she was too frightened for that, as she has admitted to me."

"Good; I did!"

"You?"

"Yes. He was gone almost in a flash, but not before I had had a good look at his face."

"What was it like?" with no little agitation.

"Like a photographed face that I am never without. Here it is."

The detective produced a photograph, and handed it to his companion.

With some differences of attitude and expression, it was the same as No. 2197 of the Parisian Rogues' Gallery, though on a smaller scale.

The diamond-merchant had started to his feet, with the picture in his hand, and, trembling visibly, was gazing at it with frightened eyes.

"Can it be possible?" he cried, hoarsely. "My God! yes, there is a resemblance. Who could have dreamed it? Fate, fate, fate!"

Here the little Leah, alarmed at the cry, though still at her bonbons, came running back from the adjoining room, whither she had retired.

She sympathizingly seized her relative's hand, and confronted the composed detective with flashing eyes.

"Bad man!" she exclaimed, in English—indeed, she seemed quite as varied a linguist as the merchant himself. "How dare you disturb my poor grandpapa so? Do not you know that he is strange—not like others? Ha!" catching a glimpse of the picture as Falconbridge was repossessing himself of it; "the vile face at the Prefecture! Man, you are perfectly horrid!"

The detective laughed, and for answer caught her in his arms and kissed her, whereupon, strange to say, the child's antipathy for him seemed to vanish on the instant.

CHAPTER III.

THE SUBTLE CLEW.

ISAACSTEIN, who had somewhat recovered his composure, looked on in wonder.

"You are an odd man, Mr. Detective," he

said, "to overcome my little girl's repugnance so magically. Ordinarily she is the reverse of familiar with strangers. However, I notice that you have very extraordinary eyes, that can be melting or stony at pleasure."

Falconbridge laughed again, in his quiet way, and after making excellent friends with the child, in the course of which he shared one of her sweetmeats with great apparent relish, she was once more relegated to obscurity.

"So, my friend," he then continued, "you admit that there is a resemblance between your scoundrelly son-in-law, Max Gersacht, and George Brookton, of innumerable aliases, the Monarch of the Stranglers?"

Before answering, the merchant poured himself out a large draught of red wine, after his visitor had declined a proffer of the decanter with a gesture, and drained it slowly.

"Yes," he replied, somewhat braced up, "or rather the suggestion of a resemblance than a real one."

"And yet it was unquestionably Brookton who attempted to abduct the child, who you admit no one would be especially interested in carrying off but her father, Max Gersacht."

Isaacstein cogitated for some moments with a troubled face, and then said, abruptly:

"How could the two men possibly be one and the same, do you think?"

"I will tell you. My to-day's glimpse of the Thug King was not the first. I have seen and studied him several times before, when in prison. He is an extraordinary man—a veritable Proteus—in the way of effecting facial changes in his appearance. He can, in fact, assume any character at will—priest, politician, merchant, man-about-town, dandy, dupe, devil, assassin or innocent—and for an indefinite period.

"Moreover, the systematic deception and marrying of young women, in all spheres of social life, either for their comeliness or their money, he doesn't seem so be particular which, is his favorite pursuit—or you might say pastime—an agreeable relaxation from his life's vocation, which is murder, pure and simple.

"Now I should surmise that your unfortunate daughter, the little Leah's mother, must have possessed both comeliness and money. Do you begin to follow me, my friend?"

The merchant had winced at the allusion to his lamented Rachel, and now shook himself hard, as if to shake off some growing distress.

"Yes, I am following you," he replied, slowly. "But wait! How, admitting this prince of criminals to be the human chameleon you claim, could these pictures of his real face, with the multifarious mask dropped therefrom, have been secured?"

"By watching one's opportunity, taking him at an unguarded moment, and then suddenly freezing or petrifying him for the time being by the stroke of a concealed electric battery, during which the photograph is taken."

"You astonish me!"

"Yes? Well, it is a French wrinkle, which I hope to see adopted in the United States and elsewhere."

"But this idea that Max Gersacht, my poor Rachel's evil genius, and the curse of my domestic peace, should have been this master criminal in disguise! It is simply appalling!"

"Still, let us consider it composedly. As a matter of course, you were more or less intimate with the man, as your daughter's husband?"

"I should say so," with an inward groan, "and to my cost, no less than hers—Heaven rest her, and confound him to all eternity!"

"Yes, yes!" somewhat impatiently. "How long did these intimate relations continue, if you please?"

"Till my poor daughter's death, one year ago."

"Ah! he had about used up her private fortune by that time, I presume?"

"He had," gloomily, "and not a little of mine, into the bargain."

"And then he cut and run, with the child of a former wife—disappeared?"

"Yes; with the little Dagmar, two years my precious Leah's senior."

You must have remarked something more or less mysterious and sinister in the man."

"There was nothing in him that wasn't. Fairly good-looking and often gay, as he was, Gersacht was a walking mystery. Poor Rachel was afraid of him within less than a week after their marriage, and, as you must know, he fairly worried and terrified the poor girl to death with his brutality, toward the last. When not running after other women, he would do nothing but mope around, and sneer, and find fault, and bully money out of her and me."

"As if it were something of an old game with him, eh?"

"Perhaps so," with renewed uneasiness.

"Or, perhaps, as if he might be having something ugly on his conscience?"

"You are wrong there. He didn't have any—that is, any conscience to be troubled."

"Just the thing! By the way—strange that I haven't thought to ask you before!—have you such a thing as his picture?"

"Yes."

"You don't say so? And what precious min-

utes I may have wasted! Let me have it, if you please."

The merchant arose, and after draining another goblet of the red wine, which his visitor once again politely declined, went into the adjoining front room of his suite.

He presently reappeared, looking more nervous and troubled than ever, with a photograph, which the detective lost no time in comparing with the one of the Thug King in his possession.

"There can be no doubt of it!" he exclaimed, decisively, after a critical inspection. "Look for yourself, mynheer." (The merchant complied, though reluctantly.) "Note the internal evidences of unmistakable resemblance, though the pictures appear so radically different at the superficial glance. There you are!"

"Humph!" with a sort of acquiescent groan.

"Mark that the features are intrinsically the same, though studiously different in the expression, while the cut of the hair, the fashion of the mustache, the carriage of the head, and even the character of the outlook from the eyes, assist so materially in the transformation," and so he went on. "But deny, if you can," triumphantly, "under this close and analytical comparison, that the portraits are differentiated aspects of one and the same man!"

The merchant grasped the picture belonging to him, thrust it into his bosom, and sunk helplessly into a chair, with the perspiration standing out in huge drops upon his forehead.

"It is true," he admitted in a hollow voice. "God of Abraham! what am I to do?"

"Do?" cried the detective, clapping him on the shoulder reassuringly. "Why, in the first place, you are to thank your lucky stars that you've never been murdered in your bed by this demon of a son-in-law of yours, as doubtless others bearing a similar relation to the rascal have not been so fortunate."

The merchant-fatalist shook his head hopelessly.

"It will do me no good," he replied. "That man will dog my footsteps hereafter, even as his demon-face haunts me now. It is fated; I feel it somewhere, here," and he passed his hand wanderingly over his partly bald head, which, from its conformation, should have been the abode of a more energetic and combative will.

"I only hope that he may!" cried the detective heartily.

"What! you hope it?"

"Yes; for then you can advise me of the fact, which I wish you to compact with me forthwith to do. You have my home-address for that purpose."

"Ah, my friend, but there might not be time."

"Oh, banish these morbid imaginings, and hope for the best."

"Morbid, no; but prophetic!"

"Absurd! At all events, promise me, if your forebodings should be realized to the extent of seeing the Thug King again face to face, you will communicate the particulars to me."

"See him again?"

"Yes; do you forget that he is, after all, an old acquaintance, under the name and personality of Max Gersacht?"

"Ah," with a moody shudder, "I had forgotten that; God help me!"

"Have I your promise to the effect that I have requested?"

"Yes, my son; there is my hand on it. I only fear that the opportunity will not be granted me."

"Nonsense!" and the hands were clasped; "who knows but that, through some hint of yours, I may yet be credited with bringing the Thug King, the Monarch of Stranglers, and one of the master criminals of the age, to look so indubitably that there shall no longer be a loophole for his escape from the death penalty?"

"Let us hope it, my son, if we can do no more," said Mr. Isaacstein, dejectedly. "And yet, Fate is omnipotent in the affairs of men."

"You err, my friend," was Falconbridge's grave response. "God alone is omnipotent."

Here the little Leah again came running back into the room.

Leavetakings were exchanged, and the last that the detective saw of the eccentric diamond merchant and his little granddaughter, whom he was not to meet again for a much longer period than he could have any idea of, they were standing together in a pathetically loving attitude, the man's hand resting upon the child's head with a light caressing touch.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

FIFTEEN years later, Mr. Joseph Isaacstein was on the deck of the steamship Hamburg, newly arrived at the port of New York.

Naturally somewhat older-looking, yet with his black beard but scantily silvered by the frosts of time. He was the center of a bustling scene, incidental to the examination of the passengers' luggage by the Custom House officials, demure underneath his brusque, business-like demeanor, there was an intensification of the fearsome, haunted look in his face, such as it had assumed directly following that memorable visit to the Paris Police Prefecture of so long

before, as if his gloomy forebodings of that period might have materialized to a greater or less degree.

A very beautiful young lady, of nineteen or twenty, whom he occasionally addressed as "Leah," was at his side, amusedly observing the scene around her while nonchalantly eating bonbons from a pretty box.

"This is very amusing!" she said, at last, "but why cannot they permit us to go to our hotel at once? We are not *contrabandistes*."

"Patience, my dear," was the indulgent reply. "You should have become used to Custom House restrictions by this time. But, here is the inspector at last."

The official, who at this juncture politely returned to Mr. Isaacstein the keys of the luggage he had been searching, was accompanied by a female inspector, who, though herself an attractive woman, glanced at the old merchant's young companion with more admiration than criticalness.

"You are a diamond-dealer, sir?" queried the official.

"Yes, my friend," replied Mr. Isaacstein, smilingly, "and I am ready." At the same time producing from his capacious bosom a small canvas satchel. "Herein you will find my stock in trade, together with the invoices as to valuations. Shall I accompany you?"

"Yes, sir; and," with some hesitation, "the young lady also. Your daughter, sir?"

"My granddaughter."

"Thanks. A personal search in both your cases is indispensable."

Leah elevated her eyebrows, with a confection still between her pearly teeth, and a general aspect of dismay.

"Ciel!" he murmured.

"I will attend to you, mademoiselle," interposed the lady inspector, reassuringly. "Do not be alarmed; the personal search is absolutely necessary, and I promise to inconvenience you as little as possible."

Mademoiselle resigned herself to the situation, and disappeared with her relative, under charge of the functionaries, into one of the adjacent saloons.

Reappearing, flustered but triumphant, a little later on, with the necessary certificates as to the honesty of their belongings, they were about to step off upon the pier, after summoning a porter and a hackman, when they were approached by a modest-appearing gentleman, who lifted his hat.

He had been a secret observer of the pair even before their retirement at the request of the revenue officials.

"Mr. Isaacstein, I greet you to America!" said this man, with much cordiality. "Mademoiselle Leah—yes, I recognize you, even after this lapse of years—I kiss your hands in metaphor, and rejoice to see that you retain your childish fondness for bonbons?"

They looked at him rather distantly at first; then a pleased illumination broke upon the merchant's face.

"Ha! it is Mr. Falconbridge, the detective!" he cried, cordially extending his hand. "Leah, my child, you must remember Mr. Falconbridge, for you were nearly all of five years old when he visited us in Paris, fifteen years ago?"

Yes, she too remembered him now, and smilingly at that, though a little less effusively than her grandparent, even while mentally remarking that their new-found acquaintance had an exceptionally fine pair of eyes, besides being very good-looking taken altogether.

Instantly, however, Mr. Isaacstein's mien had given way to the restless, haunted look already spoken of.

"My friend," he said, in a low voice, after a cautious, watchful look around, "it must be that you received my letter mentioning my proposed visit to this country, and that is why you are here to meet us?"

"It is true, mynheer."

"Good! I am glad of it. Come to me in a few hours. Here is my hotel address. There is much to say."

"One moment, my dear sir!" in a yet lower voice than the merchant's own. "Your *bete noir*, Max Gersacht, or George Brookton, the Thug King?"

"Yes, yes, that is it. The man pursues me, I am convinced of it, though, God be praised, I do not think it possible that he can have come over in the same ship with us. Later on, later on, and as soon as you please. Ah! if I shall ever be able to breathe freely again!"

And, with that, the merchant hurried away with his companion to the conveyance that was in waiting on the dock for them.

Falconbridge saw them drive away and then stood watching the stream of passengers pouring or straggling out over the steamer's gangway.

Presently his brow knitted, and he purposely advanced a step so as to be inadvertently jostled by a powerfully though sparsely built gentleman of somewhat venerable aspect, who, at a first glance, might have seemed to be stepping on American ground for the first time.

The result, however, was somewhat unexpected.

The stranger was about to resent the collision

when a glance from the detective's falcon eyes caused him to alter his intention.

"So!" he growled, back of his bristling white mustache. "But, I want nothing to do with you!"

And he was forthwith slipping off through a comparatively secluded section of the dock, piled on either hand with boxes and bales of merchandise, when the hand of the detective, who had unceremoniously glided in pursuit, was laid heavily on his shoulder.

"What!" exclaimed the stranger, angrily, and he now half-menacingly turned; "you would dare to follow me?"

The detective gave a low laugh, and he seemed to note with some satisfaction that they were alone and unobserved.

"Ay," he replied, sternly; "and, more than that—George Brookton!"

The stranger suddenly became invested with an iron calm.

Then he gave a short laugh, and drew a long breath of admirably assumed indifference or relief.

"You are a rude fellow," he said, with a strong English accent, "but I am actually glad to find myself mistaken for another person. Do you know, I really feared at first that you were an agent of one of my London duns?"

Without heeding, the detective, by a quick movement, divested the man's right hand (the other having in its grasp a traveling bag) of its glove, thus exposing an exceptionally long, lean and sinewy hand, with unusually large and knotty knuckles and finger-joints.

"Practice makes perfect," he sneered. "The tools of the Thug King—the Monarch of Stranglers—hold their own bravely."

"You are either a fool or a lunatic!" exclaimed the other, peremptorily recovering his glove.

"Neither the one nor the other, but plain Jack Falconbridge, the Falcon Detective, at your service."

"Little matter to me who or what you are!"

"Indeed it is!"

"Whom do you take me for, and what the devil do you want?"

"This!"

And, with a more rapid and complicated movement than his first touch, he stripped the face before him of its disguising beard and mustache!

It was the haunting face of the rogue's gallery of the French Prefecture that Falcon thus unmasked—the face of George Brookton, the Thug King.

For an instant it lighted up with the passion of a fiend—murderous ferocity glaring out of its every lineament—and then its iron composure or indifference was restored.

"Pshaw! what of it?" growled the man, with a laugh, quickly recovering and resuming the disguising appurtenances, to which the detective offered no opposition. "There is nothing against me that has not fallen flat, as you ought to know."

"True; nothing as yet. And be mighty careful that there be nothing more."

"You speak in riddles."

"Not I! You have not come across the ocean in the same ship with the Dutch diamond-merchant and his granddaughter (*your daughter*, by the way) for naught."

"I don't know what you mean," still immovably.

"Yes, you do, and perfectly, Max Gersacht. Ha! I see that I have touched you at last! Well, look to yourself, my man; for henceforth I am your Nemesis; and it will rest wholly with yourself as to whether or not I am afforded the opportunity to hunt you into a noose no less remorseless than your own strangling grasp."

The disguised scoundrel laughed mockingly, and, no opposition being offered, forthwith hurried away.

A few minutes later, the detective saw him enter a hackney coach, in which a very handsome young woman seemed to be anxiously awaiting his approach.

Falconbridge raised his hand as a signal, and was promptly joined by a shrewd-looking little boy, who had evidently been on the watch for it from somewhere on the still crowded pier.

"Follow that coach, Tommy!" was the low-voiced command, "and report to me at your earliest opportunity."

"Ay, ay, my liege!" was the reply; and the boy glided obediently in pursuit of the disappearing coach.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOTEL D'AMSTERDAM.

THE Hotel d'Amsterdam, which Mr. Joseph Isaacstein had given as his New York address, was a first-class but unpretentious hotel, situated in a quiet up-town cross-street, and much frequented by foreign sojourners and residents, for the most part rich or well-to-do, many of whom permanently occupied apartments *en suite* with their families.

It was after the evening dinner hour when the detective was enabled to call upon the new arrivals there.

He was cordially received in the parlor of the handsome suite they had engaged, even Mademoiselle Leah, who was seated at a reading-table, novel in hand and the inevitable box of

bonbons at her elbow, looking up with a gracious smile of welcome.

"Fairly and comfortably settled down already, I perceive," said Falconbridge, sinking into a proffered chair after the customary common-places had been exchanged.

"Yes," assented the merchant, a little irritably; "but the deuce! What do you think, my friend? More inquisitiveness on the part of those detested Custom House Paul Prys!"

"An outrage!" murmured the young lady.

"What! a domiciliary visit?" exclaimed the detective, smiling.

"Yes," with a frown; "as if we had not been searched enough on the steamer. *Peste!* to think of me being suspected of smuggling diamonds at my time of life. But some busybody must have put them up to it."

"Still, diamonds are so much money in so little compass, you know."

"But to be suspected of smuggling them—of downright dishonesty, sir! Zounds!"

"Well, how did they make out?"

"Oh, of course they found nothing seizable where there was nothing to be found! But the annoyance and mortification were just the same."

The detective looked up with a sort of quizzical smile. It would be a good thing, he thought, to increase whatever confidence these persons might have in him.

"But you shouldn't be too hard on the customs officials, my friend," said he. "What diamond-merchant is not open, more or less, to the suspicion of smuggling a few of their bright, precious little wares, on occasion?"

Mr. Isaacstein waxed somewhat virtuously indignant, while Leah raised her eyes to the visitor with a peculiar look.

"Indeed!" said he, a little stiffly. "Well, you will pray consider me an exception to the rule."

"Oh, of course, if you insist," with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "But were the officials very thorough in their search?"

"What can you mean, my friend? I should say they were! Not an article belonging to us escaped them."

The detective laughed good-naturedly, and, stretching forth his hand, he emptied the contents of mademoiselle's bonbon box out upon the table, notwithstanding a swift movement on her part to prevent him, while the merchant suddenly lost something of his assurance.

"Not even these?" he asked, selecting several of the bulkier confections.

"Wait, sir, wait!" cried Mr. Isaacstein, nervously. "My granddaughter is very particular about having her bonbons manipulated by other than herself, and—"

Then he sunk back, paling visibly, while "my granddaughter" burst into a musically ringing little laugh, in which the meddlesome visitor heartily joined.

The latter had just snapped in two each of the confections in his hand, and out of each had tumbled a large and valuable brilliant!

"What a pretty and unique wine-drop for the heart of each!" he cried. "But, the deuce! Do not be alarmed, my dear sir. I am not a customs detective, I assure you, and your little secret is perfectly safe with me. The temptation to show up the neglectfulness of those inspectors was too great to be resisted, that was all."

The merchant now ventured to join in the laugh at his own expense, and all were once more so thoroughly at their ease that, upon Mademoiselle Leah having occasion to leave the gentlemen alone together a little later on, the graceful action was accompanied by a smiling glance for the visitor, for which many a man might have envied him.

"Now as to our business in hand," the detective said, seriously enough. "This is your first visit to this country since our separation, fifteen years ago, I presume?"

"It is, my friend," replied the merchant, seating himself at the opposite side of the little table, upon which the bonbons had been replaced by a salver containing a decanter and glasses.

"Your letter to me was brief, though dark enough in its hints."

"Ah! but one cannot always write his inmost fears."

"Tell me them, then. Am I to infer that your forebodings proved prophetic?"

"Yes."

"The man is really dogging you, then?"

"I am convinced of it—my evil genius, sir, my haunter!"

"And has been during all these years?"

"Off and on, yes; no doubt of it."

"Have you been actually confronted by the man?"

"No; but only had fleeting glimpses of his accursed face, which were more than sufficient to confirm my suspicions, however."

"How often?"

"Three times," reflectively, "to my certain knowledge; the last time in Bremen, a month ago."

"Why should he have followed you so long and persistently, and yet with no developed purpose that he has brought to a head?"

"My friend," with a troubled look around

him, even in the cheerful, well-lighted room, "the man's purpose—his ultimate purpose—is to murder me for my valuables. That he has not done so heretofore is, I presume, simply because both the opportunity or the prospective reward have been lacking."

"Ha!"

"Yes. I am satisfied that my enemy has an instinctive and constant knowledge of my habits and my possessions. I have therefore been cautious to never journey or sleep abroad with sufficient valuables in my possession to make my assassination worth the Thug King's while. That is, I have taken this precaution up to the present time, when it was no longer practicable. Hence my increased anxiety."

"Ah! I begin to understand."

"My friend, I am glad you do. Sympathy is no less agreeable than actual assistance at times. Have some wine!"

"I may be able to afford you both the one and the other, mynheer," replied the detective, accepting the proffered glass. "Here is to our more thorough acquaintance."

"Thank you, my son. The same to yourself!"

And the glasses touched, and were emptied.

Falconbridge had reflected as to whether it were best to acquaint the merchant with the fact of his immediate danger from the Thug King's dogging pursuit or not, and at last decided that a full enlightenment on this point were preferable.

"So," he said, slowly, "you have now sufficient diamonds to tempt cupidity, you think?"

"Yes, and it was unavoidable. My firm, Van Ness & Teneycke, expect me to make some important sales among your New York fashionables, whose love for diamonds is proverbial the world over. To this end, I have stowed of their property in my possession to the value of at least two hundred thousand dollars. They form the contents of the bag that you saw me so frankly offer for the appraisal of the customs' inspectors on the steamer. In addition—well, you yourself exposed my little bonbon *ruse*. There are a dozen of those specially rare gems, my private property, say to the cost value of fifty thousand dollars, upon which I hope to realize a pretty individual profit. There you are, my son."

"A quarter of a million's worth!" exclaimed Falconbridge. "Good Lord, man! You don't carry such valuables upon your person?"

"Yes, I do. It is necessary that they should constantly be in readiness for inspection by such intending purchasers as I shall visit from time to time. To have them under lock and key in a bank, or safe deposit company, would be inconvenient to the last degree. And your hotel safes I do not think much of."

The detective shook his head.

"A great risk!" he said. "You but tempt your fate."

"Fate can't be tempted. It will come when it is fixed, neither before nor after, and nothing can alter it. Besides, I have really no choice in this matter."

"Bosh! Look here, Isaacstein, you are right in supposing that some one put up the customs officers to that troublesome domiciliary visit of to-day. That is, I have good reason to infer as much."

The merchant straightened up with a sudden start.

"Eh? You are sure?"

"Yes, reasonably so."

"Who could have prompted their suspicions against me?"

"George Brookton, the Thug King, *alias* Max Gersacht, your sometime son-in-law, who was your disguised fellow-passenger on the Hamburg."

"Good God! you can't mean it?" faltered the merchant, in an ecstasy of terror.

"Yes; and you will now see whether you can afford to slight my advice as to securing your valuables elsewhere than upon your person."

And the detective forthwith recounted his meeting with Brookton on the steamship pier.

The diamond-merchant fell back into his chair, completely unnerved.

"It is upon me!" he murmured, in a hollow voice. "Fate, fate, fate!"

CHAPTER VI.

KISMET.

At this point of the interview the detective purposely began to display some temper, as being perhaps the best means with which to arouse the fatalistic Isaacstein from his dangerously submissive mood.

"You make me weary!" he exclaimed, in no little disgust. Look here, man. Instead of maundering about Fate in this cowardly manner, why don't you take it by the throat by at once placing your diamonds in the hotel safe, and taking a receipt for them. You say you believe your haunter is instinctively aware of your habits and possessions. Well, that step will at least secure you temporary immunity from personal peril."

The merchant, who had in some measure regained his composure, shook his head stubbornly.

"No use!" he said. "If it is fated, so let it be. But I cannot part with my diamonds."

"You mean that you will not."

"Have it as you please, my son. Besides," with a glimmering shrewdness through his miserableness, "my haunter, mysteriously penetrating as he may be, cannot know quite everything. The firm's diamonds, yes, they are my bosom companions. But those smuggled rare ones, my individual property—well, my friend, they are elsewhere."

His meaning suddenly flashed upon Falconbridge, who thereupon sternly confronted him, with a muttered oath.

"Miserable man!" he exclaimed. "Have you dared to make your beautiful granddaughter the sharer of your peril by making her the custodian of a part of your valuables?"

"Hush! not so loud. The girl is absolutely fearless."

"She can't take much after you then," contemptuously.

"But," heedless of the sarcasm, "apart from herself, no one can dream of it, save you and I."

The detective continued to protest and argue by turns, but to no effect.

Wearied at last, for it was now waxing late, he abruptly arose, and announced that he would at least inspect the suite of rooms, to satisfy himself as to their security against a possibly burglarious attempt.

This the merchant, who had been drinking goblet after goblet of red wine, probably in support of what the detective considered as his infatuated pig-headedness, readily assented to, and even accompanied Falconbridge upon the examination.

The rooms were five in number, on the fourth floor, the parlor being the only one fronting upon the street, and at such a great height therefrom that no great danger could be apprehended from that quarter. The three communicating apartments next in order each, together with the parlor itself, had a door opening upon the private hall-passage, every one of which was found to be provided with adequate fastenings.

Coming to a pause before the communicating door of back or last room in the suite, Mr. Isaacstein said:

"We must cease our investigation here, my friend. Mademoiselle has selected this for her bed-chamber, and, as I have not heard her stirring for some time, she has probably gone to rest. Of course she must not be disturbed."

"Of course not," discontentedly. "But I should most of all have liked to inspect this room."

"But I can tell you all about it. What is it you must know, my son?"

"There is a window?"

"There is."

"What is its outlook?"

"Into the deep, well-like court in the center of the hotel building. The flagged area at the bottom is even deeper down than the street-level—sixty feet, if a yard—and the four walls could offer not the slightest foothold or hand-grasp to the most adventurous of nocturnal clamberers."

"Ah! But your granddaughter and yourself are absolutely alone in the occupancy of the suite?"

"True. Leah's French maid treacherously deserted her at the last moment of sailing, and there was no opportunity to supply her place."

"What is it, grandpapa?" called out a sleepy, but yet musical, voice from the interior.

"Ahem! nothing of much consequence, my dear. But then, you see—" and he went on to explain.

Then a low, gentle and amused laugh, like rippling water sounded from within.

"Let Mr. Falconbridge be at ease, grandpapa. If all the rooms are as well secured as this one, we are safe enough. My window is fastened, and, moreover, a monkey itself could not climb up the smooth outer wall from below. *Bon soir, messieurs!*"

After this, the detective reluctantly took his departure, after receiving Mr. Isaacstein's assurance that he would personally attend to the inner fastenings, besides remaining vigilantly on the alert.

"Kismet!" was his farewell at the door of the private hall. "What will be will be, my son, and let us merely trust in fate for the best."

The detective then went to the hotel office where, luckily, he recognized in the night-clerk on duty an old acquaintance, one Augustus Fowler, a man of integrity and discretion.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. Falconbridge," said this gentleman when the matter had been somewhat explained to him. "I'll order our watchmen to keep an extra lookout upon the Isaacstein suite during the night, besides paying exceptional attention to the courtyard area. More than this, our private detective shall be given a special warning in the way of suspicious characters."

Then he caused the diamond on his shirt-front—not a particularly enormous diamond, you know, but then the Amsterdam was not an

enormous hotel, though of goodly proportions—to flash professionally as he acknowledged the detective's thanks with a courteous bow, and then the latter hurried away.

At the door of his own lodgings, which chanced to be in the near neighborhood, he found his faithful little factotum, Tommy Dodd, patiently awaiting him.

Tommy had already reported the disguised Thug King and his handsome female companion to have driven to and registered at a prominent hotel as "Mr. Thomas Shurtlief and niece, Miss Wanda Manheim, of Bremen," and had been set to keep a watch on them thereafter.

"So!" said Falconbridge; "what brings you here, my boy?"

"Bad news."

"Out with it!"

"Disappeared!"

"What! you let them give you the slip?"

"There was no help for it, boss."

"Explain."

"Their promised luggage hadn't reached the St. Bride's at eight this evening, though they had cashed up for meals and accommodations up to that hour, when they took a hack for the Italian Opera, having paid for a ten-dollar stall at the hotel ticket counter."

"Well?"

"I followed 'em into the Opera House, and then lost 'em as if by magic. The seats they had paid for weren't occupied during the performance."

"Of course. They had slipped in at one door and out at another, and of course none of the promised luggage has yet made its appearance at the St. Bride's?"

"Exactly."

"All right! perhaps you couldn't have helped it."

The detective then sketched the situation at the Hotel d'Amsterdam, and the boy was dispatched thither, to remain on the secret lookout, keep his own counsel, and report without delay anything unusual in connection with the Isaacstein suite of apartments.

Then Falconbridge went to bed.

It was unusually soft, spring-like weather, though early in the month of March.

Early on the following morning, in fact soon after daylight, Tommy Dodd, who had lodging in the same house with his principal, entered the latter's room, and aroused him out of a sound sleep.

"Anything happened?" demanded Falconbridge, sitting up at once, broad awake and with his thoughts completely in train.

The boy looked disturbed and anxious.

"I don't exactly know, boss," was the response. "But what is the meaning of the word 'Kismet'?"

"The fated must happen, or something of the sort, I believe. But 'Kismet,' eh?" And the detective was forthwith out of bed, hurrying on his clothes. "Why do you say that?"

"Because that word is now written on the outside of Mr. Isaacstein's private hall door, and it wasn't there half an hour ago."

"Kismet?"

"Yes."

"On the outer door of the Isaacstein apartments?"

"Yes; and in red letters, as if traced with the point of one's finger freshly dipped in blood."

"You have told no one else of this?"

"Not a soul."

"When did you make this discovery?"

"Twenty minutes ago, scant."

"Come! no time is to be lost."

They darted away together in the direction of the Hotel d'Amsterdam.

Too late!

A frightful alarm was already spreading when they reached there.

"Where is it?" demanded Falconbridge, of the night-clerk, who was hardly less panic-stricken than his hotel associates.

"Something terrible, I am afraid! Miss Gersacht—the beautiful young lady—she seems to be wholly beside herself!"

The detective reached the fourth floor by a series of up-stairs bounds, and rushed into the Isaacstein suite, already thronged with pale faces.

Mlle. Leah, looking like a ghost, perceived him from one of the inner doors.

"Oh, monsieur!" she managed to scream out, "the dreaded strangler has been here before you! My poor grandpapa—he is dead—robbed and murdered!"

CHAPTER VII.

TAKING BREATH.

It was true.

The unfortunate diamond-merchant had laid down to rest, without disrobing, in his dressing-wrapper, slippers and fez smoking cap, and now lay thus, quite dead.

The bed-room was in a frightful state of confusion—a bursted trunk, portmanteaus ripped open, their contents scattered.

Evidences enough of there having been a deadly, but doubtlessly brief and silent, struggle.

On the throat, deep, indenting marks of the strangling fingers; on the lips a bloody ooze,

into which the murderer's finger had doubtlessly been dipped, in order to trace that word "Kismet," in terrible irony, upon the outer door, before skulking away into the unknown.

How could that irony have been perpetrated, unless he had been secretly on hand to overhear that farewell word of his victim to the departing visitor?

Matter for subsequent speculation, but not for now.

The bosom of the waistcoat and shirts were torn open, probably to get at the little jewel-sachel, which was nowhere to be found.

An hour or two later, when the excitement had slightly calmed down, with the police in possession of the rooms, and the hysterical Leah carried off by some sympathizing ladies of the hotel, the private detective of the establishment, Dick Pryor, touched Falconbridge on the shoulder.

"You are curious to know how the murderer gained access into the rooms?" he said. "Come with me. It is something marvelous."

He led him into the back-room, which had been occupied by the young lady, and pointed to the window.

Almost the entire lower sash had been cleanly cut out by some sharp and powerful instrument operated from the outside.

Pryor directed his companion's attention down into the deep, well-like inclosed area.

A brief examination was enough.

A lightning-rod running up the wall, and partly pulled out from its fastenings, was revealed as the means by which the criminal had made his way up, perpendicularly, to the yet more insecure vantage-ground of the outer window ledge, upon which he had doubtless, nevertheless, maintained his crouching position over the abyss, while forcing the sash, probably with the noiselessness and dispatch of a veteran house-breaker's dexterity.

"What do you think of it?" demanded Pryor.

"That only one man in the world could have accomplished this ascent and entrance," was the reply.

"And who was he?"

"The robber and murderer of Joseph Isaacstein."

"Of course; but who?"

"The Thug King."

Pryor started back in amazement.

"George Brookton, the Thug King!" he exclaimed; "the mysterious strangler, who has thus far—through so many years—defied the judicial and detective world?"

"Exactly."

"But he is a European rogue."

Falconbridge shrugged his shoulders, and made no answer.

Pryor laughed.

"Of course, you'd keep your secret in spite of me, major," said he; "so I sha'n't even try to pump you."

"I shall keep my own counsel, Dick, and take this matter in hand."

"What do you mean?"

"That I from this moment undertake the case in Miss Gersacht's interests."

Pryor knew of Falconbridge's visit of the preceding evening, and had surmised that he was an old acquaintance.

"Surely the case couldn't be in better hands than yours," said he, quite heartily. "And I sincerely hope yours may be the coveted detective honor to run down the cunning Thug King at last. I sha'n't even say a word of what you have hinted, if you wish it."

"As you please, my dear fellow; though I have little fear of the rivalry of the regular police detectives in the matter."

"Play your lone hand then, major. It won't be the first time you've done it with profit and success."

"Now to business, Dick. In spite of the forewarnings you hotel people had last night, how could the Thug King have got access to the court below there?"

"Well, he's the devil for disguises, is he not?"

"A very Proteus!"

"That explains it. He could easily have slipped in by personating one of the porters or waiters."

"Sol! Now as to his egress after the murder, and that blood-writing on the door?"

Pryor scratched his head.

"It beats me completely," he admitted.

"There was scarcely ten minutes during the night and early morning that some one wasn't keeping an eye upon the apartments. However, he must have managed it somehow."

"Very likely. Well, let that go for the present."

"Hold on, major!" for Falconbridge, after a glance around the room, was turning to go.

"There is one other thing."

"What is it?"

"Hasn't it struck you as odd that the criminal could have forcibly entered and passed through this chamber, without awakening its lovely occupant?"

"Such criminals doubtless operate in silence little short of absolute. Besides, Miss Gersacht may be an unusually sound sleeper."

"Agreed to all that; but still don't you think it somewhat odd?"

"Yes."

"What else do you think?"

"Just this, Dick," and the Falcon Detective laid his hand on the other's arm with impressive earnestness: "That the young lady was utterly attached to her grandfather, and would, I am satisfied, have cheerfully died to save him, had it been possible."

Nothing further was said.

Two weeks later, Falconbridge visited the Hotel d'Amsterdam, where Mlle. Gersacht had continued to reside, and sent up his card.

Joseph Isaacstein was in his grave. The tragedy was now a mystery of the past, the inquest having developed nothing. Leah had signified her determination of remaining in America until the mysterious assassin of her beloved relative should be brought to justice. But save for one brief interview, in which she had formally placed the case in Falconbridge's hands, he had not had private speech with her since that dreadful morning.

His present visit was in obedience to a note from her requesting the interview.

Mlle. Gersacht now occupied a small and very pretty suite in a different quarter of the hotel.

She had also employed a French maid, who received the detective in the corridor, and straightway conducted him to her young mistress's presence.

Leah seemed to have thoroughly recovered her strength and nerve, and the detective and she were soon conversing thoroughly at their ease.

"I suppose it is agreed between us, my friend," said she at last, "that my poor grandfather's assassin is that terrible Thug King?"

"It ought to be."

"The owner of that terrible face that so impressed him at the Paris Prefecture when I was a little girl?"

"Yes."

"Shall you capture him?"

"Sooner or later, or die in the attempt!"

"I like to hear you talk that way. We must work together—no?"

"Undoubtedly. Without your assistance, I might be powerless."

"I am glad to hear you say that. No trace of him yet?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, he and the beautiful companion I spoke to you about have apparently disappeared as indubitably as if the earth or sea had closed over them."

"Why did you say 'not exactly' then, in response to my first query?"

"Vanished men may leave footprints."

"Ah! you are not then of the prevailing impression that the murderer has managed to make his way back over seas?"

"No."

"But he would not venture to dispose of any of the stolen jewels in this country?"

"Certainly not; but he could bide his time."

"But why should he linger hereabouts?"

"I shall better reply to that later on," slowly.

"You see, I am gradually thinking it out."

"I shall repose the most implicit confidence in you, Monsieur Falconbridge."

"Thank you, mademoiselle. By the way I see that you have at last succeeded in securing a maid."

"Yes; and to my liking. Is she not pretty, too? Some young mistresses," with a smile,

"might object to that."

"But there would be no need with you, surely."

The implied tribute to Leah's own beauty was evidently pleasing.

She touched a little bell, and the maid appeared.

"A fresh box of bonbons, Justine!"

The maid was two or three years her young mistress's senior, but a blonde—a blonde with black eyes, whereas Leah was a brunette with blue eyes—and quite as beautiful; though much of her attractiveness was marred, perhaps purposely, by a self-constrained, even melancholy mien.

Mlle. Gersacht looked up with a smile, when the bonbons had been supplied, and the maid had disappeared.

"You have had a better look at Justine," she said to the detective. "What to you think of her?"

CHAPTER VIII.

LEAH'S SECRET.

THE detective's answer somewhat surprised Leah Gersacht.

"The woman appears to be capable," said he.

"How was she recommended to you?"

"By a Spanish lady here in this hotel, a Senora Vasquez," replied the young lady.

"Justine had formerly been her maid. But I was very particular, and Justine also had recommendations in writing, which I found satisfactory."

"Written recommendations?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me see them?"

"Certainly." And the recommendations were forthwith produced.

They purported to be from various ladies in distant cities, highly commending the fidelity and efficiency of the bearer, "Justine Chapelle."

"Forgeries, every one!" was Falconbridge's swift mental decision.

But he merely handed them back to Leah, after a brief inspection, with the remark that they were highly flattering.

"I hope you will excuse my seeming officiousness on your account," he said.

"It isn't officiousness, and I like it," she answered, earnestly. "Though I am a young woman of no little independence of character, it is pleasant and comfortable to know that you take a protective interest in me."

"Thank you. You have no one to look to, then, since your grandfather's death—no male relative, I mean?"

"None, or female either, for that matter," with a quiver of the lip. "I am alone in the world."

"If you wish it, my relations with you shall henceforth be fraternal (protective, as you said,) no less than professional."

He held forth his hand.

She impulsively laid her own, glittering with costly rings, in his broad, muscular palm, where it lay like a dewdrop-jeweled lily.

"I do wish it, my friend!" she exclaimed, with tears in her eyes. "I shall trust in you henceforth as in a brother."

"It is a compact." One of his rare sweet smiles brightening his face, as he pressed and relinquished her hand. "Now there must never be any reserve between us."

"No, never any reserve. That is," with a nervous little laugh, "unless by special permission. A young girl—"

"Is privileged to have some secrets, as a matter of course. Now as to this Senora Vasquez, who recommended Justine to you?"

"Yes."

"Was she here before the tragedy?"

"No. She has been here about a week, and has been very kind and sympathetic."

"What is she like?"

"A very strange-looking lady—more than elderly. I don't know how to describe her. But she is very amiable, and will be glad to come to me now, if I send for her."

"Never mind; some other time will do. Now as to yourself, Miss Gersacht."

"Well?"

"Don't you want to ask some question as to yourself?"

"How clever you are, my friend! Of course I do! Now that the terrible affair is somewhat blown over, what do the public think of me?"

"I am glad you have asked. The coroner was very indulgent with you."

"I know that."

"Luck also befriended you."

"Ah!"

"Yes; in more ways than one."

"An instance, if you please."

"Well, the murderer passed through your room to reach his victim."

"*Mon Dieu*, yes!" with a little shiver.

"And without awakening you?"

"Of course."

"Though cutting half the window-sash out to accomplish the feat."

"It would seem so." Averting her eyes.

"Well, there is the first instance. The coroner only commiserated the soundness of your sleep under those terrible circumstances, while the public seem to have actually rejoiced in it, lest you might also have fallen a victim—a preliminary victim, we will say."

He tried to study her face, but she as persistently prevented him, aided by her fan and the bonbon-eating.

"Ah, my friend," pleasantly, "how considerate the public can be at times!"

"Yes," smiling; "a consideration that saved you no little annoyance in the present instance."

"Granted!" suddenly facing him archly, in response to his smile. "Do you think it was because I am—not ill-favored?"

"That and your bereavement—your unprotected position."

"But you are to be my protector hereafter, you know."

"Yes; hereafter."

"How good that sounds!"

"Oh, we'll be good friends!"

"I am sure of it. Well, in what other way did good luck befriend me?"

"In the way of the bonbon diamonds, as we may call them."

"Oh!"

"Yes; the fifty thousand dollars' worth, your grandfather's private property, of which you were custodian."

"Well, my friend?" slowly and guardedly.

"They are still in your possession, as a matter of course."

"They are in the hotel safe."

"A wise precaution! Would that your poor grandfather—"

"I understand, my friend," hastily interrupting him. "Too late to think of that now!"

"True. But a bank or safe deposit company would be still better for you."

"I have the hotel proprietor's receipt, and understand that he is fully responsible."

"He is. But then diamonds to the amount of fifty thousand dollars!"

"Ladies of the opera, with whom this is a favorite hotel, have been satisfied to similarly intrust their jewels, I understand, and to a much larger money value."

"Very likely, but only for a short time."

"My friend, I am content."

"Good, then. Your depositing the diamonds below, then, must have been the first intimation any one could have had of your saving them from the robber."

"Outside of yourself, yes. You alone could have been aware of my grandfather's private property in my secret custody."

"Now I am come to your second stroke of good-luck."

"I begin to understand."

"You are very bright. You had the bonbon diamonds with you on the—terrible night, as a matter of course."

"They were clutched to my heart, in a little bag suspended about my neck."

"Ah!"

Leah Gersacht had lost nothing of her admirable self-possession for a single instant.

She now looked up to her companion with a swift but composed intelligence.

"My friend, I know what you mean. You wonder why the criminal—the terrible Thug King—did not kill and rob me first, as a preliminary to the greater crime."

"It is not so much that as what the coroner and his jury would have thought, had they suspected your possession of diamonds to the lesser amount."

"And it was my good-luck that they could have no intimation of this?"

"Decidedly."

"What," slowly, "could have been the result to me had it been otherwise?"

"Frankly?"

"Do not spare me, I beg of you."

"You might have been suspected of—"

He came to a pitying pause.

Leah had turned pale.

"Surely," she faltered in a low, frightened voice, "not—not of collusion with my grandfather's murderer?"

"If not of that, at least of a knowledge of his identity, or personal appearance; of not having been asleep at the time of his passage through your room on his murderous errand."

Mlle. Gersacht drew something like a breath of relief, and regained her composure so thoroughly, that the detective could not help saying to himself: "This is one of the most extraordinary young women I ever met. Is this virtuous strength of character or duplicity? I shall be lucky if I find out in a hurry."

"That peril to me is past now," she said, thankfully.

"Yes; and I am glad of it."

"Wait!" she exclaimed eagerly. "Even had they known of my possessing those diamonds?"

"Well?"

"Why, how could the criminal have known or guessed it?"

"Do you forget the incident of the blood-written 'Kismet,' as showing the extent and intimacy of his knowledge?"

"True." Then, after a pause: "My friend, tell me what you think."

"As to what, Leah?"

"As to the possibility of my having been awake, and thus perceiving the murderer's passage through my room."

"I believe you are absolutely innocent and pure."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you! But still as to that possibility?"

"That is your own secret."

She looked at him imploringly.

"I know it is. Say that you will let me keep it—only for a little while—without thinking hard of me."

He knew that she would keep it for all that he might say. So he smiled and held out his hand, as the sign of his consent.

She grasped it trustingly, and then returned to her confections, with a relieved air.

"You are fairly well supplied with money, I hope, Miss Gersacht," said the detective.

"Yes," she replied. "Of course, you must know that my grandfather's will, by which I am made his sole heir, was found among his effects."

"Yes."

"Well, he had deposited two thousand dollars (meant for our living and traveling expenses) with the hotel proprietor. I have that and the—the bonbon diamonds, as you call them. Moreover, there is the Amsterdam real estate, from which there are certain rents."

"I am glad you are thus well-provided," and Falconbridge rose to go. "I may require some of your money in running the Thug King to earth."

"Of course—everything I possess, should it be necessary. You have no definite trace of him and his young lady companion as yet, then?"

"I cannot answer you till, say, to-morrow."

He was taking his leave when Justine entered the room rather abruptly.

"Madame Vasquez would like to know if mademoiselle will presently be disengaged?" the young woman said.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SENORA VASQUEZ.

THE detective had no need of Mlle. Gersacht's sign to remain, but at once resumed his seat with pretended carelessness.

"Is Madame Vasquez at the door?" asked Mlle. Gersacht.

"Oui, mademoiselle."

"Ask her to come in."

And then the senora entered.

"Dear madame," said Leah, with a smile of greeting for her visitor, "this is Mr. Falconbridge, the detective, likewise my good friend. Mr. Falconbridge—Madame Vasquez."

The new-comer was a very large, very dark, foreign-looking lady, of more than middle-age.

She was richly dressed, and might have been handsome in her younger days, though one side of her face seemed somewhat drawn, as if from some perpetual neuralgic affection, while her still fine eyes were more or less masked by a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, which had a settled, permanent look upon the bridge of her aristocratic nose.

She was very stout, and her movements, though naturally heavy and lumbering, were not ungraceful.

A languid composure of manner, combined with an observant restlessness or alertness of the eyes, seemed to be her distinguishing trait; while there was something *bizarre* or theatrical in her morning costume and general appearance.

An enormous green parrot was composedly perched upon her shoulder, though for a wonder the bird was neither noisy nor loquacious, but only kept up a series of scarcely audible croaks as it sat there, blinking its yellow eyes owlishly, or cocking its head from one side to the other in a knowing way.

At the mention of the word 'detective' Madame Vasquez had looked at Falconbridge very keenly, while graciously responding to his bow.

"I am pleased to meet with the senor," she said, with but a slightly foreign accent, as she sunk with a little sigh into a proffered seat. "This gentleman, then," turning to Leah, with a somewhat distorted smile, "is the great private detective with whom your unfortunate kinsman was so pleasantly acquainted, my dear?"

Leah replied in the affirmative, and, after offering some of her bonbons, which were accepted, at once entered into a gossip chat with her visitor with regard to their hotel life and its environments.

As this was doubtless done to enable the detective to take note of Madame Vasquez at his leisure, he did not neglect the opportunity.

"A veteran adventuress!" was his mental comment, as a preliminary; "and probably no more of a Spaniard than I am, though she might be French or German."

And then, from a general inspection of the woman's self-possessed *tout ensemble*, he fell into a curious study of her hands.

Though white, plump, well-shaped and womanly, they were exceptionally large, with a suggestion of covert muscular power to an unusual degree in the owner, and they were thickly covered with expensive rings.

Now, as she chatted carelessly with Mlle. Gersacht, in a pleased, indulgent, somewhat motherly way, her hands trifled lazily with a great black fan, and she seemed almost to have forgotten the detective's presence, while the parrot continued to croak softly, and to cock its head this way and that while apparently engrossed altogether by the latter's appearance.

Suddenly Falconbridge's presence was recalled to the ladies by an unexpected demonstration on the part of the eerie bird.

"*Caramba!*" (squawk!) "*Carajo!*" (squawk!) "*Diablo!*" abruptly shrieked the parrot, without the slightest warning, in Spanish. "Who have we here? A spy, a fraud, a traitor in the camp! Maledictions!"

And, glaring at the detective with a diabolism that would have done credit to Poe's raven, it finished off in its vituperation with a vociferated torrent of Spanish oaths and execrations that might have put a professional pirate to the blush.

Leah burst out laughing, while Madame Vasquez coddled the bird into silence, but at the same time looked disturbed and grave.

"I am sorry for you, senor," she said to the detective.

"Oh, never mind me, ma'm," replied Falconbridge, imperturbably. "Parrots are privileged characters everywhere. A Brazilian, eh?"

"Venezuelan." And she shook her massive head slowly, while the semi-distortion of her face grew more apparent as she eyed him suspiciously. "But I am really sorry for Pompo's outburst, senor."

"Why so?" asked the detective, not a little amused, at least on the surface, while Leah still looked smilingly on.

"Because, senor, in such unexpected outbursts he is always—how should I express it in your barbarous English? Ah, I have it—prophetic, infallible, true to the mark."

"Oho! A festive bird, truly!"

"Yes, senor," still gravely, observantly. "A profound, an intuitive bird."

And the parrot, having been restored to his perch on her shoulder, softly gurgled, and cocked his head afresh, with his yellow little eyes fastened eerily on Falconbridge.

"So you really believe, then," remarked the latter, "that I am a spy, a traitor in the camp, as your remarkable bird has characterized me?"

"I only know that Pompo says so, senor," composedly.

"But I don't see how I should have incurred Pompo's displeasure on such slight acquaintance."

"Neither do I, senor."

"Have you got a camp, ma'm?"

"A camp, senor?"

"Yes. There must be a camp somewhere, as a matter of course, for me to be a traitor in one, you know."

"Ah!" and for the first time Madame Vasquez moved a little uneasily. "But then I suppose Pompo used the word—what shall I say?—metamorphosedly."

"Metaphorically."

"Yes; that is what I mean."

"Suppose we drop the incident," here interposed Miss Gersacht, a little wearily. "Pompo is just like any other parrot I ever saw, a clamoring nuisance on occasion, and all this is too ridiculous!"

Madame Vasquez shrugged her shoulders, and as Justine entered at this moment to announce something in a low voice to her young mistress, the detective rose to go.

As he did so he noted a swift glance of intelligence that passed between the visitor and the maid.

Leah accompanied him to the door of the private hall, having closed the parlor door behind her.

"I shall call again this evening," he said, in a guarded tone. "You will be alone?"

"Yes, my friend." And she gave him her hand with a trusting air.

"In the mean time, be on your guard."

"How?"

"Yes; both as regards Madame Vasquez and your maid. I shall expect a faithful report of everything they may say or do."

She looked a little puzzled, but nodded brightly, submissively, with her pretty smile, and they separated.

The long hotel corridor was apparently altogether deserted.

But as the detective turned the first angle, on his way to the staircase or elevator, he wasn't particular which, a small figure stepped out from an empty room doorway, and Tommy Dodd was before him.

Falconbridge lifted his finger warningly.

"Not a word here!" he whispered. "Go on before me."

The little fellow nodded, and then darted away.

They rejoined each other a few moments later in an adjoining saloon.

"You were on watch?" demanded the detective.

"Just like a fish-hawk, my liege lord."

"You saw the dark-featured, elderly woman enter Miss Gersacht's rooms while I was there?"

"Yes, boss, parrot and all."

"It won't do for me to be too inquisitive with the hotel people. You must pump them for all they are worth with regard to her."

"Name?"

"Madame Vasquez."

"I'm your Ariel, boss. In the mean time, there's other news."

"Well?"

"Mr. Thomas Shurtlief briefly appeared at St. Bride's Hotel last night."

The detective started.

It was as "Mr. Thomas Shurtlief and Niece" that the Thug King had registered for himself and companion, it will be remembered, at the hotel in question.

Here was news indeed!

"You are sure?" demanded Falconbridge.

"Sure as a gun, my liege."

The detective remained for a moment plunged in thought.

CHAPTER X.

FLYING THREADS.

"BUT this seems almost incredible!" exclaimed the detective, after his reflective pause.

"He was there, boss."

"But why wasn't he arrested on the spot? The entire police have his description, and are fairly on the jump to clap the irons on him."

"There wasn't time, the clerk said."

"So he just dropped into the hotel office for a few moments, eh?"

"Yes, to ask about a missing package—a box of ladies' gloves, I believe—which he thought might have been left in the room that had been occupied by his niece."

"What else?"

"The night clerk knew nothing of any such package, and told him so."

"Well?"

"Then Mr. Shurtlief turned abruptly on his heel and was gone before the clerk could decide how to act. The St. Bride's detective was called and informed, but it was too late."

"What time of night was it?"

"While the theaters were letting out, somewhere between eleven and twelve."

"There may be a clew here, which I shall follow up at once, and alone."

"Yes, boss."

"In the mean time, you must remain unremittingly at the Hotel d'Amsterdam till you can report to me this evening."

"To watch Madame Vasquez?"

"Yes, and Justine, Miss Gersacht's newly-engaged French maid."

Tommy Dodd nodded sagaciously, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, gave utterance to a soft little whistle, that puckered up his wrinkled little mouth most comically.

"Ah, you have seen the maid already?"

"Twice in the corridors, boss, and without being seen myself. She's a French daisy, she is!"

"And as cunning as she is pretty. I am satisfied that, unsuspected by Miss Gersacht, there is a secret understanding between the young woman and Madame Vasquez, who, in fact, recommended her."

"I am on to it."

"Good!" And, taking out his note-book, which he rested upon the saloon table at which they were sitting, Falconbridge began to write rapidly.

"Here!" he said at last, tearing out the written leaf, folding it, and passing it over to his companion, who was looking reservedly expectant. "You will hand this to Mr. Jacques, the chief or day clerk at the Amsterdam, without delay."

Tommy bowed solemnly, with one of his extravagant, theatrical gestures, hastily drained the half-glass of beer that was before him, and was gone.

"If I could only have had a better look at the Thug King's female coach companion on the pier that morning!" said the detective, thinking aloud. "As it was, her half-veiled face was gone in a flash, and I wouldn't know her again from Adam's wife. However, there is no help for it."

He was about rising when there was a slight crash in one of the "*cabinets particulier*," or private supper-room, against whose partition his back had been leaning.

This was well in the rear of the saloon, which was narrow and deep, and so far distant as not to have attracted the attention of the employees at the bar and lunch-counter forward.

With a swift, noiseless movement, the detective slipped around and into the cabinet, whose door was ajar.

A waiter had slipped off a chair, upon which he had evidently been standing, probably while eavesdropping over the top of the partition.

A strongly-built, sinister-visaged Italian-appearing man, whom Falconbridge, though an old frequenter of the place, did not remember to have seen before.

In an instant, and without noise, the detective had the fellow by the throat in his iron grip.

"You were spying—listening!" he hissed between his clinched teeth.

"*Corpo di Cristo!* no, signor," was the gasped response. "I was dusting the chairs and walls."

He pointed to a feather duster lying at his feet.

"Still you overheard."

"Nothing, signor; *Santa Maria!* nothing."

"Where have I seen you before?"

"Nowhere. Impossible! The signor surprises me. I am an honest and poor man, newly arrived in America."

He spoke so laboriously in a species of pigeon English that it was probable he could improve upon if he wished.

A sudden light of memory came into the detective's stern face.

Despite the man's struggles, which, however, it was evident he was desirous of rendering as noiseless as might be, Falconbridge, with a swift, expert movement of his disengaged hand, tore upon his collar, and, stripping it far back, exposed the fellow's swarthy left shoulder-blade.

A small but blood-red and indelible branding-mark was made visible.

"As I thought!" muttered the detective, contemptuously. "A quarry convict—a Genoese galley-bird! I seldom forget a face."

The man, who had tremblingly readjusted his clothing, silently threw himself at the detective's feet.

"Mercy, signor!" he murmured. "I am trying to be honest in this new land. A word to the major-domo here will cost me my employment, and I have a wife and child!"

The detective's falcon eye was critically fixed upon him.

Was the man's supplication genuine, or was there seething revenge underneath it?

It was an open question.

"Your name?"

"Giuseppe—Beppo—Malletto."

"Where do you live?"

A Harlem tenement-house address was promptly given in reply.

"Are you not a creature of one George Brook-

ton, alias Max Gersacht, alias the Thug King, alias le Monarque des Etrangleurs?"

"I am no one's creature, signor—your words mystify me."

Falconbridge gave him a hard smile.

"All right!" he said, coldly. "Your secret is safe with me—for the present, at least."

And, abruptly turning on his heel, he quitted the cabinet.

It was still so early in the day that the saloon was almost bare of custom, though the lunch-counter and adjoining cook room were busy with preparations for the midday rush.

Falconbridge corroborated the truth of the name and address which had been given him by exchanging a few words at the cashier's desk with the German proprietor of the place, with whom he was well acquainted, and then lost no more time in hurrying away to the St. Bride's Hotel, in the hope of picking up what might prove a clew, however faint.

To return, for the present, to Master Tommy Dodd, that precocious youth speedily presented the note which his master had given him (after a sly glance at its contents, as we may well believe of such an inquiring mind) to Mr. Jacques, the chief clerk of the Hotel d'Amsterdam.

The latter flashed his bosom diamond, and drew a little breath of resigned annoyance, as he read it.

"Are we never to be rid of this detective business?" he said to himself with an inward sigh. "And now to think of this old Spanish lady being somehow mixed up with the affair. However, there is no resisting Falconbridge."

He turned to Tommy, with whom he had no less of an acquaintance than with his master.

"Do you know what you are to do, my lad?" he asked.

"How should I?" was the naive response. "Perhaps you are to give me a spare theater ticket or two?"

"And perhaps I'm not. You're to fraternize with the bell-boys on yonder bench; and pay exclusive attention to Madame Vasquez's room-bell, which is Number 39." He pointed to the electric-bell indicator over his desk. "Ryan, who is about your size, was discharged yesterday. You will find his uniform jacket somewhere, and assume it at once. That will do. Look sharp!"

"I never look any other way, Mr. Jacques," replied Tommy, smilingly. "It's a way I have."

A few moments later he was installed on the expectant bench with the half-dozen regular bell-boys of the establishment, blue-jacketed and brass-buttoned as they, and the life of the set.

All were kept more or less busy pretty constantly, with the exception of Tommy; but at last, after about half-an-hour's waiting, a certain bell jingled, and the oval nickel-plate bearing the number 39 shook out its signal on the indicator.

The sign of the clerk was not wanted for the boy to dart away in response to the summons.

"A bottle of claret and dish of ice for 39," he solemnly announced, on reappearing at the office desk a moment later.

The clerk smiled approvingly, and exchanged a wink with Dick Pryor, the hotel detective, as he handed the boy the necessary order upon the wine-room for the refreshments demanded.

When Tommy again made his appearance in No. 39, Madame Vasquez, who was luxuriously reclining on a lounge in a rich morning-wrap, signed him to place the salver on a little table within reach, and said, in her broken English:

"Are you very busy this morning, little boy?"

"No, ma'm," replied Tommy.

"I may want fresh attention at any moment," observed the senora, lazily. "You'd better remain here with me; that is, if it isn't against the hotel rules."

"It isn't against 'em, ma'm, in the case of ladies," Tommy respectfully answered, only too glad to remain.

Then he gravely seated himself in a corner, and, as madame languidly prepared and sipped a glass of the red wine and ice, the parrot, which now occupied a gilded perch in the window just over her reclining form, began to roar forth in Spanish at a most vociferous rate.

Tommy apparently eyed the bird with boyish interest.

"Why, the green little cuss must be a-swear-in', ma'm!" he ventured to remark, and then put on a sheep-faced look, as if uncomfortable over his temerity.

Madame Vasquez put up her glasses and stared at him a little superciliously.

"Ah, I thought I wanted something else," she said, after a pause. "Little boy, bring me a package of cigarettes." And she mentioned the brand.

When Tommy returned with the cigarettes, Justine, Mlle. Gersacht's maid, had just slipped into the room before him, and was exchanging some words in Spanish with Madame Vasquez.

The conversation instantly ceased at the lad's entrance, and both women looked at him somewhat sharply.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GREEN PARROT.

THEN Madame Vasquez addressed some words to Tommy in Spanish, while taking the cigarettes he had brought.

Tommy simply scratched his head and stared.

"Little boy," she continued, now in her broken English, "do you understand no language but your own?"

"Oh, yes, ma'm," with an air of pride. "I've picked up enough lager beer saloon Dutch to stand me at a pinch."

Both Madame Vasquez and Justine laughed, and then, when the former had signed the boy to resume his seat in the corner, the conversation was resumed in Spanish, with which language, however, Tommy was more familiar than he had let it appear; he having picked up a smattering of the language in two or three professional trips he had accompanied Old Falcon on in both old and New Mexico.

However, he was now apparently chiefly interested in the parrot, which, oddly enough, in response to numerous coaxing gestures, presently changed its perch to the back of a chair quite near him, and seemed croakingly willing to improve its new acquaintance.

"Mademoiselle Gersacht is preparing to go out shopping, you say?" said the senora.

"Yes," was the maid's reply. "So I can only stop with you a moment."

"Come in again when she is gone. There is much I wish to ask you about the senorita."

"As soon as I have finished helping her to dress."

"Buena! Has she said anything yet to you concerning the detective?"

"Not a word. But the young lady is liking me better every hour, and may become more confidential presently."

"That is well."

"I must go now, or I shall be questioned as to my lingering. *Caramba!* you see, it is just this way, my dear—"

Justine suddenly paused, as if on the verge of some imprudent familiarity, brought up with a round turn, as it were, by a rebuking frown on the part of Madame Vasquez.

"Be careful!" interposed the latter, warningly.

"But the boy can't understand us."

"No matter. So much depends on our preserving our roles intact that we must practice them even when alone together, without a break."

"I'll try to be more circumspect."

"That is right, my dear. Be sure and come to me when Mademoiselle Gersacht goes out. There is something in the wind."

"What is it?" and Justine looked up quickly.

"Another time, my dear. But it may cause me to absent myself for hours, and at any moment."

Justine took her departure, Tommy covertly watching the attractive figure as it disappeared.

Then the parrot began to cackle and talk without restraint, and he burst into a boyish laugh.

Madame Vasquez looked over at them indulgently, while lighting a fresh cigarette.

She had been smoking constantly, when not sipping her iced claret, from the moment of receiving the package.

"You two seem to have made friends in short order," she said.

"Parrots and me always get along together, ma'm," replied Tommy, with one of his oldish grins, and he held out his finger to the bird in a way that elicited a mock-angry squawk. "If we shouldn't I'd wring their necks."

The occasional distortion in the senora's heavy, dark face seemed to grow more pronounced as she surveyed the boy more attentively through her gold-rimmed glasses, the jewels meantime sparkling on the large hand that adjusted them.

"Do you like him, Pompo?" she gravely questioned of the bird.

A vociferated series of huzzas, intermingled with Mexican or Venezuelan profanity, was the response.

"*Carajo!* but you're a shrewd one," commented the senora, half to herself. "For you were just as prompt to recognize that accursed detective as our enemy."

"Pompo!" cried Tommy, pretending not to hear the rest. "What a jolly name! We always call 'em Polly in this country, no matter whether they're hes or shes. However," scratching his head, "I once knowed a Portuguese sailor who had a yaller-headed parrot that he called 'Cristo.'"

She was paying no attention, while still inspecting him lazily.

"What is your name, little boy?" she suddenly asked.

"Thomas Jinks, ma'm," was the prompt falsehood in response.

"Have you always been a hotel boy?"

"Not quite, ma'm. I was a babe at the breast once—that is, if they didn't bring me up on the bottle. I can't swear to which, it's so long ago. However," with bright confidence, seeing that the lady was beginning to frown. "I've been pretty much everything in my time. Fact is, I fancy I'm something of a thoroughbred."

Madame Vasquez looked puzzled.

"What is a thoroughbred?" she asked.

"Oh, a cool card, an anti-chump, a feller what's cut his eye-teeth and is up to snuff."

"Oh, I see! *Caramba*, wait!"

And, with much apparent innocence, Madame Vasquez produced a jeweled snuff-box from her bosom, and set it open on the table beside her.

"Help yourself, Thomas Jinks, if you are fond of it," she said, condescendingly. "There is no one here to see how familiar I am with you."

Though by no means the dupe of her affected unsophistication, Tommy threw back his head and stuffed his handkerchief in his mouth, in a vain attempt to stifle his apparently uncontrollable mirth, while Pompo gave a stentorian squawk in sympathy.

Then he undertook an explanation, which Madame Vasquez seemed to accept good-humoredly, though not without a natural show of mortification.

"*Por Dios!*" she said pettishly. "I shall always be a fool in your difficult language, I suppose."

"Oh, no, ma'm!" observed Tommy, encouragingly. "All you require is to knock around a bit, and keep your ear-drums peeled."

Suddenly a revelation seemed to dawn upon the senora.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Madame la Princesse," with a dramatic flourish, "eighteen winters and seventeen summers are supposed to have shed their snows and dews upon my poetic brow."

"Eighteen!" in evident surprise, and with a certain added caution in her voice and manner. "*Caramba!* I might have suspected it. But how small you are for your age, Thomaso!"

"Hurrah!" bawled the parrot, in very passable English, which was in itself a surprise, at least to Tommy. "Hit one of your own size, or go to hell! (Squawk! squawk!) Give me a drink! I'll take mine straight! (Squawk!)"

The senora smiled, and began to soak a cracker in her wine for the parrot's satisfaction.

Tommy straightened up his right arm, and felt of its biceps rather ostentatiously.

"I don't go much on size, ma'm," said he, flushing. "But them as knows me says I'm lunched up mighty compact."

"Ah, I do not doubt you. By the way," after a reflective pause, "do you know anything about detectives?"

"Don't I, ma'm?" with a self-conscious air.

"What, you do?"

"I once shaddered pickpockets for a detective what is now dead," explained Tommy, sententiously. "I reckon he was mostly too drunk and shaky to do his own shadderin'. Leastwise, it was generally agreed that I was no slouch at the trick."

Madame Vasquez was at once interested, though still with a puzzled air of only partly understanding the boy's slang.

"Draw up your chair closer to me, Thomaso," she said, quite genially. "You can have some of my wine, if you wish. Besides, I want to talk with you about detectives."

Tommy at once complied, having observed a letter which the senora had inadvertently dropped while producing the snuff-box from her bosom, and which he was intent upon surreptitiously securing.

But the green parrot forestalled him by suddenly fluttering to the floor-side of the sofa, seizing the letter in its beak, and hopping off with it in the adjoining bed-alcove, unperceived by its mistress.

Tommy concealed his disappointment, gratefully accepted the glass of claret which the lady condescendingly tendered him and furtively kept his eye on the bird and its prize, praying that the latter might not be torn into shreds before he could capture it.

CHAPTER XII.

TOMMY DODD'S FINE WORK.

MADAME VASQUEZ had suddenly become quite loquacious and inquiring in her foreign way, which was not without a sort of melodious charm, and began as a preliminary to tell all that she knew and did not know about detectives.

Tommy listened respectfully, but at last interrupted her by an impatient gesture.

"One minute, ma'm!" he cried, pointing through the half-drawn portiere into the adjoining alcove. "There's a whopping big cockroach under the bed in there!"

"A cockroach!" echoed Madame Vasquez, with a great pretense of fright, though without altering her reposeful attitude. "Santa Maria! a tarantula, do you mean?"

"Almost as bad. But wait, ma'm; don't disturb yourself. I'll squeak him."

With that he dived into the alcove and under the bed, whither he was certain she could not follow him with her eyes without discommoding herself, and where Pompo was just getting in a work of demolition on the coveted letter.

Smash! went his fist with repeated blows on the carpet, and then the letter, in spite of the bird's protesting squawks, was triumphantly secured.

"I've smashed the bug, ma'am!" he called

out, while leisurely retreating from under the bed, "and Pompo is chawing up the mangled remains."

"*Diablo!*" called back the senora, in some temper. "A bug more or less is nothing. Come back here, you little imp!"

"Yes, ma'm."

But before Tommy obeyed, he found occasion to make a swift examination of the lady's bed, to the revelation of a formidable dirk-knife under the pillow, and a large-sized six-shooter hanging from a concealed hook at the side of the couch, where it would be instantly within reach of the rudely-awakened occupant's grasp.

"Tough tools for feminine toys!" thought Tommy, as he composedly reappeared in the outer room. "Maybe she's a female bandit in disguise, such as used to make the Old Bowery Theater howl in Fanny Herring's and Adah Isaacs Menkin's day."

"Thieves and murder!" screeched the parrot, fluttering excitedly back to its gilded perch.

"Hang him by the neck!" (Squawk! squawk!)

"Hit him with a brick!"

"The queer little cuss!" smilingly commented Tommy, resuming his seat at Madame Vasquez's side. "He's mad because he couldn't swallow that roach alive and whole. How he rumples his neck! And just listen to him scold!"

But Madame Vasquez was too deeply interested in the subject matter in hand to care for anything else.

"Enough of that—enough!" she said, impatiently. "Now tell me, Thomaso, didn't assistant detective work pay you much better than being a drudge of a hotel bell-boy?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, I should rather smile!"

"Why should you smile?" angrily. "Who cares whether you smile or frown. What do you mean by saying that you should rather smile?"

"I mean that I should rather say it did pay better."

"Oh!"

"Yes, ma'm."

"Then why did you quit the detective work for such ill-paid drudgery?"

"What are we, ma'm, all on us," dramatically, "but the caitiffs of fate—the base slaves of tyrant circumstance?"

"*Caramba!* what a strange little fellow you are! But then I mustn't forget those eighteen years that have passed over your brows poetical."

"I'm thought to be no man's chump, ma'm, in my particular line," said Tommy, with grave self-assertion. "And my line embraces the cosmos of the universe."

"Well, well, I don't ask you to be my jump any more than any one else's. But I might find profitable employment for you, should I find you capable."

"Ma'm, I'm your most devoted as long as you've got a leg to stand on; or, excuse me, I should have said as long as you've got a dollar to your name."

"Sol!" smiling. "Well, I've got a good many dollars, Thomaso, both in and out of my name."

"Do you want anybody shadowed, ma'm?" with low-voiced eagerness.

"Yes—perhaps so," slowly.

"Name the galoot, ma'm."

"Galoot?"

"I mean, what man do you want shadowed?"

"There is a detective," said Madame Vasquez, hesitatingly, "who calls himself Falconbridge, or something like it."

"Falconbridge."

"Yes, that is it."

"Major Falconbridge, the Falcon Detective, otherwise Old Falcon."

"But he isn't old."

"No matter; he's got the name, and it sticks. Yes, ma'm. Everybody knows him, and he knows everybody."

"Ha!" disappointedly. "Does he know you, then, Thomaso?"

"I fancy not, ma'm. I am," dejectedly, "one of the exceptions. I'm altogether below his sphere."

Madame Vasquez brightened up.

"So much the better," she exclaimed. "I do not like this man. I would dearly love to circumvent—ruin him."

Tommy shook his head incredulously, but continued to eye her eagerly.

"Oh, but I could provide the sinews of war!" said the senora, confidently. "Tell me now, in that case, do you think you could shadow this Old Falcon for me, and find out everything worth knowing about him—his haunts, his habits, his present affairs in hand, and all that?"

"Try me, ma'm."

Here a step was heard approaching along the outer corridor.

"No more of this at present," said Madame Vasquez, hurriedly, and she slipped a bank-note into the boy's hand. "I shall be absent this afternoon, but will converse more fully with you this evening. Resume your seat over yonder in the corner."

Tommy mutely obeyed, and a moment later Justine re-entered the room, without knocking.

The latter was about to speak out impulsively when the senora silenced her with a sign, and then said to the boy:

"Is the *table d'hôte* for luncheon ready, Thomaso?"

The Hotel d'Amsterdam was run on the European plan, and, apart from the *tables d'hôte*, everything in the edible and drinkable line was a *la carte*.

"I think so, ma'm," was the reply. "It must be sharp on to half-past eleven."

"I shall not descend to-day. Bring or send sandwiches, bread and butter, spiced oysters and *caviare* for two, together with another bottle of claret with ice."

"Yes, ma'm."

"Can you," turning to the maid, "think of anything you would like better for lunch than the trifles I have mentioned, my dear?"

"No, *je vous remerci*, madame," replied Justine, jumbling her English with her French worse than madame did with her Spanish, though speaking in a singularly sweet, softly modulated voice, that somehow reminded one of Leah Gersacht's in its velvety inflections. "I seldom care for much between breakfast and dinner."

"That will do then, Thomaso. But you may also bring a salad—of chicken is the best."

Tommy immediately vanished, though sorely against his will, so loth was he to lose anything that might pass between the women, he was now so fairly upon a scent, with a chance at a conspiracy, whose unfolding might raise him immeasurably in the estimation of the master-detective, whom he had come to serve quite as much *con amore* as for gain.

However, he managed to linger long enough on the staircases to glance at both the bank-note and the surreptitiously captured letter.

"A tenner, or I'm a Dutchman!" he gleefully ejaculated to himself, after a glance at the money, a crisp, new ten-dollar greenback, and he pocketed it afresh with no little satisfaction. "By Jupiter! the old girl must mean downright business, or she's more rich and careless than the run of 'em."

The writing was merely two or three lines, in a feminine hand, without date or address, on a folded half-sheet of note-paper, to the following effect:

"Have visited the old house, and doubt not it will temporarily answer your purpose. Meanwhile you had better carry out your other scheme—the better because the bolder. When we can venture to meet again, you can tell me whether I shall engage rooms for Mme. Vasquez or not. D."

The letter was in English, as reproduced above.

Considerably disappointed at its apparently insignificant purport, Tommy put up the letter, and made up for lost time by hurrying downstairs.

When he reappeared in No. 39 with the collation ordered, Madame Vasquez and her visitor did not impress him as having had much conversation as yet.

Both were calmly smoking cigarettes, and looked up with some interest at the fresh bottle of claret, which had probably been impatiently waited for.

"Ma'm," said Tommy, obsequiously tip-toeing across the floor, as if apprehensive of interrupting meditations far above his lowly ken, "there's a sort of theater-rush in the grub-room, and a waiter would have been so long a-fet'chin' the things that I brung 'em myself."

He set down the salver.

"I'm glad you did, Thomaso," replied Madame Vasquez, with an indulgent but distorted smile, as she promptly set about filling the glasses and inspecting the dishes with an air of relish. "A strange man might not have been so welcome. Aha! you did get the salad, and chicken salad at that."

Tommy flushed up almost painfully at the personal compliment, and flutteringly retreated into his corner, with his head perked up in the air, very much like the parrot itself, which was suddenly all agog in anticipation of tidbits.

Justine quietly observed the boy, with an inscrutable smile upon her beautiful blonde face.

"A blonde with black eyes!" thought Tommy. "Why, she's as handsome as Miss Gersacht, though on a different lay-out."

Then the women at once began to converse in Spanish, while eating, the most of their conversation being easily understood by the eagerly-listening boy.

"Then you think," said Madame Vasquez, "that it always takes her so long to dress when she is going out?"

"I infer so," was the maid's reply. "She is that particular! And everything, even to the underwear, so expensive."

"Ah! money a-plenty, eh, even apart from the diamonds?"

"She seems to have no lack of it."

"Haven't you anything to tell me?"

"Well, you see she hasn't grown so very confidential yet awhile."

"But you learned that she had deposited the diamonds in the hotel safe?"

"I eavesdropped that much when she was consulting the detective."

"And her ready money?"

"I can only piece together some few fragmentary hints she has carelessly let fall to me."

"What do you infer from them?"

"That she has cash in abundance—probably all that the old man brought with him for their expenses; perhaps also a considerable sum of his savings which he had meant to invest in speculations in this country."

"Ah! but wouldn't he have carried it with him, no less than the Van Ness and Teneycke diamonds?"

"No; or—the operator would have got both money and jewels."

"True."

"I think she must now have the money in bank—perhaps in one of the savings banks—whether the old man put it there on that first day of their arrival or not."

"What makes you think that?"

Before Justine could reply, they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

CHAPTER XIII.

TOMMY IN THE SWIM.

At a sign from Madame Vasquez, Tommy opened the door.

A genuine bell-boy, shockle-headed and obviously of the Irish persuasion, was revealed.

"A gentleman below as requests an audience," he blurted out, with a half-envious look at Tommy.

"His card?" demanded Madame Vasquez, knitting her brows.

"He says as how it aren't naded, mum."

"Fellow, what do you mean? Who and what is the gentleman?"

The boy, whose name was Kelly, broke into an uncouth grin.

"An Eyetalian, mum; a waither from the Dutch risterant around the corner. It is Mither Jewseppy Malletto."

"Oh!" composedly. "Tell the fellow to call again in an hour. Go!"

But this, doubtless out of jealousy for the soft snap which the newly-engaged bell-boy, "Thomas Jinks," seemed to be enjoying, Kelly was in no haste to do.

In fact, he stood there gaping until Tommy, with a surprising strength, dexterity and "bouncing" expertness which could hardly have been looked for, summarily grabbed the gossoon by the collar, and kicked him out of the room; after which he composedly locked the door and resumed his seat with a deprecating bow.

Madame Vasquez nodded approvingly, while Justine gave a silvery little laugh that was even more musical than her speech, as the interrupted conversation was resumed.

"Well," said the maid, "Mademoiselle Gersacht has a check book. I saw it in her bureau."

"Ah, proof enough." And then, after knitting her brows in thought, Madame Vasquez abruptly said, and with much harshness: "That accused detective!"

"Yes," and Justine grew thoughtful. "There is trouble for us there."

"Unless we circumvent him."

The maid merely made a pretty little shrug of her shoulders, without replying.

"You overheard their talk," cried the senora, impatiently.

"The most of it."

"How is the case between them? Tell me everything!"

"They have made a compact."

"A compact?"

"Yes," slowly, and while looking her veteran companion strangely in the eyes. "In addition to his agreeing to bring her grandfather's murderer to justice, he is to be the young lady's protector—her brotherly counselor and friend." She ended with an odd little laugh.

Madame Vasquez smiled hideously.

"The scoundrel is both handsome and suave," she said, half to herself, after a pause.

"Parbleu!" interestedly. "There is no denying that."

"Will Leah come to care for him?"

"How should I know? Perhaps so. She doesn't fairly abominate him at this stage. I am sure of that."

"Diablo! We'll have a finger in that pie."

"We must do our best."

"There's a side issue, my dear, that you might make covertly—and right speedily at that."

"Indeed!" and Justine elevated her pretty brows.

"Yes; you are quite as pretty as Leah."

"Dame! how you talk."

"Granting the pair of you are about equal in good looks."

"Well, granting it, then."

"With this difference, that you are blonde, she brunette."

"Yes."

"Well, the detective is a brun."

"What of that?"

"As if you did not know!"

"Oh, do speak out, anyway!"

"He would take more naturally to you than to her. The affinity of contrasts, you know."

"Well?" indifferently.

"Diablo!" with temper. "Couldn't you encourage him to fall in love with you at a pinch?"

Justine merely shrugged her shapely shoulders again, and sipped her wine.

"What do you say?" demanded the senora.

"The man is of iron, I fancy."

"Carajo! there is no human iron that the blandishments of woman's beauty may not melt."

"Eh, bien!" thoughtfully; "I will think it over and study the ground. There is no hurry."

"Bueno! No, as you say, my child, there is no hurry. That is, not an iota must be hazarded by precipitation. But then they say this Falcon Detective strikes like a bolt when he does strike, and no precaution must be neglected."

"Fear nothing; I have the affair *en train*. In the mean time, as to this odd little fellow whom you so suddenly find trustworthy?"

With an odd little half-smile, she glanced furtively at Tommy's corner, where he was exchanging cock-eyed glances with the parrot with the most owlish preoccupation.

"Come here, Thomaso!" called out Madame Vasquez, in her broken English.

"Yes, ma'm." And Tommy was promptly at the side of the table in response.

"You are willing to make a trial of the secret service I hinted of?"

"Yes, ma'm," briskly. "That is," after a slight pause, "if I can keep my place here in the hotel till sure that I'm going to make a steady thing of it with you, or not."

"That is only for the present. I would like to test you at once, if you could obtain your liberty for this afternoon."

"I can manage it with Mr. Jacques, the clerk ma'm. What's the test?"

"That you get on the track of this Falcon Detective at once, and minutely—as the photograph itself, you understand—report to me this evening every movement of his throughout the afternoon. I shall have means of knowing whether your report is perfect or not."

Tommy started.

"Mr. Falconbridge has the reputation," he said, slowly, "of being a holy terror—cunning as a fox, remorseless as a wolf."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, ma'm. If he should catch me dodging him, he might either kill me, or jug me out of sight and mind for six months, with nobody the wiser. He's a cannon-shot!"

"Are you afraid?"

"Afraid!" indignantly.

Then Tommy, striking a scornful attitude, again felt of his biceps, and in a way that evoked a burst of laughter from the French maid.

Tommy looked at her with demonstrative interest.

"Would you, also, ma'm'zelle, like me to undertake this deed of derring do?" he asked, with an amorous grin.

She laughed again, but nodded an unmistakable and vigorous affirmative.

"All right!" with twinkling eyes and audaciously smacking lips. "Give me a kiss from that purty mouth of yours, and I'm into the affair, tooth and nail."

Justine slightly blushed, but she only laughed the harder while exchanging a glance with Madame Vasquez.

"What are you so mealy-mouthed about?" asked Tommy, persuasively. "You're a French gal, ain't you? And would you be afeard to kiss a little boy like me?"

"Oh, *bon Dieu! C'est un enfant amusant!*" And, still laughing, she forthwith threw her arms about him, and planted a kiss full upon his thin lips.

"Bully!" cried Tommy, executing a small hornpipe of ecstasy. "Ma'm" (to the senora,) "you can count on me. Ma'm'zelle, I'm your mash till death."

"Justine, my dear," quietly interposed Madame Vasquez, "I have now to inform you that Thomaso's appearance is deceptive. He is eighteen years of age."

Justine fairly crimsoned.

"Why didn't you say so before?" she cried, in a rage. "*Milles diables!* it was unfair of you."

"Oh, it's all hunky!" exclaimed Tommy, jubilantly. "I'm your pigeon, Justy; count on me."

The French girl made an indignant movement to box his ears, but was restrained by Madame Vasquez.

"That will do, Thomaso," said the latter, smiling. "See that you make the best of the test." And Tommy lost no more time in effecting a disappearance.

An hour later, he secretly perceived Mlle. Gersacht return from her shopping tour; and, a little later on, Madame Vasquez quit the hotel in a coach, with whose foreign-looking driver she seemed to be acquainted; while she also exchanged an intelligent nod with a man on the opposite sidewalk, whom he made up his mind to be Bell-boy Kelly's "Eyetalian waiter from the Dutch risterant around the corner."

Then, after exchanging a word with Clerk Jacques, he devoted himself industriously to keeping himself *non est* until he should meet Falconbridge in the evening, as per instructions.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A SLIGHT CLEW BETTER THAN NONE."

FALCONBRIDGE, on his part, directly following his separation from Giuseppe Malletto, the spy restaurant waiter, had lost no time in seeking an interview with the night clerk at the St. Bride's Hotel.

Luckily, he found him on morning duty, also, by reason of sickness on the part of the chief, or day, clerk.

"Your little assistant reported the affair correctly," said the young man, whose name was Cathcart, on having the subject brought to his mind. "The man was here briefly last night. Of course, I knew of his suspected identity with the murderer of the diamond-merchant. But it all rushed upon me in a kind of a swirl; and before I could collect my thoughts, or summon up my presence of mind, he was gone—vanished out of those glass front-doors as absolutely as if he had been swallowed up by the overhead blackness of the night. I could have clubbed myself afterward from sheer mortification. But what good would that have done?"

"None at all. But the best of men are apt to temporarily lose their heads in such an emergency."

"Oh, but the deuce, Falconbridge! One doesn't like to show the nervous white feather, even for a surprised instant. Come into the wine-room, and have something with me. Or we can have it in here for that matter. I'm monarch of all I survey just now, besides being overworked and knocked up generally."

They were in a luxurious little private room, just off the main office, and adjoining the cloak-room, the St. Bride's being one of the unobtrusively ultra-fashionable hotels of the metropolis.

"Not now, thanks; some other time," the detective made answer, with his accustomed politeness. "And if you are feeling nervous and overworked, my dear Cathcart, take my advice by waiting for the sleep of exhaustion as your best restorer."

"All right, major."

"Besides, I want to talk over this matter calmly with you."

"Consider me at your service."

"Thanks! You know, of course, that I am morally certain of this Shurtlief and George Brookton, the Thug King, and presumably Mr. Isaacstein's murderer, of being one and the same?"

"Exactly. Gr-r-rh! It makes me shudder, and to long for a revolver in my grip every time I think of it."

"So I thought I might pick up something of a thread from your last night's experience—any clew, however slight, being better than none."

"Humph! you mayn't be far out of the way. But just excuse me a minute, will you? I want to ask the cashier to look after my desk and registers, so that I can remain here with you without being interrupted."

The clerk accordingly disappeared, but quickly returned, closing the door behind him.

"Here we are!" said he, genially offering the detective a fragrant Partaga, while lighting one for himself, and resuming his *vis-a-vis* seat.

"The man," continued the detective, "only confronted you at the desk two or three minutes, I understand?"

"Three, at the outside."

"What was his manner?"

"Perfectly natural and composed. Dash it all! that was what non-plused me so completely for the time being."

"I understand that he spoke of a box of gloves that might have been left behind by Miss Mannheim?"

"Yes."

"And he went away the instant you disclaimed any knowledge of the missing package?"

"Yes; vanished in the smoke-wreaths of the cigarette he was smoking, you might say."

"Oh, you exaggerate!"

"Not at all. Too bad—too bad!" said he, with a shade of annoyance. "I suppose the package is lost irretrievably." Then he muttered something between his teeth that sounded like "*Kismet*" as he turned. There was a vision of his stalwart back through a farewell wreath of the cigarette smoke. The glass doors of the main entrance seemed to open and close without a sound, and *presto!* as the legerdemain chaps say, he was nowhere. Almost at the same instant I recovered myself sufficiently to give the alarm. Our detective and porter were out of the door almost before it could have closed behind him. No use. However, the theaters were just letting out, and the walks were thronged; though the electric lights were bright as midday, as you must know."

Falconbridge had started at the mention of the ominous word, and after that did not seem to pay much heed to the volunteered details.

"Kismet!" he repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, now that I think it over, quite sure. That was the muttered word."

The detective temporarily dismissed this phase of the subject.

"Were there others about the lobbies at the time?"

"Oh, yes, quite a number. Going and coming, you know."

"Odd that the man should have taken such a risk, merely for a box of gloves!"

"There was more than that to it. His manner proved it, as subsequent events have done."

There was a new inflection in Cathcart's voice. Falconbridge looked up quickly.

"But you had no knowledge of the package, I have been told."

"Not then, certainly."

"Don't be enigmatical, my dear fellow."

"I investigated more thoroughly this morning, when all the help were come-atable."

"Well?"

"The package had really been left in Miss Manheim's room. One of the chambermaids had surreptitiously appropriated it. She, however, restored it to me this morning, intact, as I think, with the customary tears of contrition."

He arose as he spoke, and, going to a closed scroll desk, opened it and brought to light the package, which was at once placed in the detective's hands.

The wrapper was loose, and inside was an ornamental long pasteboard box, such as the Parisian glove-manufacturers use for packing their more expensive wares.

Falconbridge eagerly raised the lid, and then his countenance fell.

A dozen of the best six-button kids to be sure, scented, shapely, and of delicate hue; but what did that amount to?

"Look down underneath," suggested Cathcart, with a superior smile; "I did."

The detective quickly obeyed, and brought out four or five letters.

They were all addressed to "Mlle. Dagmar Gersacht, 72 Rue de Helder, Paris, France," in a peculiarly characteristic masculine hand, and were all, with a variation of a few months, of a date two years back. But the subject matter of the letters. All were brief, and in cipher. They bore date plainly, however, from different cities in continental Europe and England.

"Puzzlers, eh?" queried the clerk, as Falconbridge coolly opened the epistles one after the other, and spread them on a small table before him.

The detective smiled.

He was an old hand at cipher writing and cryptography.

"A pencil and some paper, if you please," he requested.

These were at once supplied, and Cathcart hung over him with suppressed excitement as he plunged into the mystery with silent industry.

"Here we are!" said he, at last, after making numberless rapid essays upon the paper; and he forthwith began to explain.

"It's wonderful!" exclaimed the clerk, with half-enviable admiration. "What a head-piece you've got!"

Having mastered the secret of the cipher, which was not a very difficult one, the detective proceeded to master the letters, one after another, to himself, with the ease and rapidity of an expert.

Cathcart, who was fairly devoured with curiosity, could with difficulty conceal his disappointment.

"See here, major!" he cried at last; "ain't you only half-polite?"

"Oh, by Jove! I beg your pardon," replied Falconbridge, looking up with a laugh as he completed his task. "You see, the letters are of less importance than I hoped for. I'll translate you some of them."

He did so, four of them, in fact.

They were evidently addressed from father to daughter, chiefly on domestic matters, or with regard to certain musical studies in which the recipient seemed to be engaged at the time, and were of so little moment as only to renew Cathcart's disappointment.

"The deuce! is that all!" he grumbled, as the translator, coming to a pause in his readings looked up with a wearied air.

"Pshaw!" and Falconbridge swept the letters into a bunch, and pocketed them. "However, the handwriting may be of future use to me."

The fifth letter, however, which he had been careful not to decipher aloud, was the cream of the lot.

It was dated at London, and ran as follows:

"If I should have to cut and run, by reason of this last unpleasantness, and it should prove advisable for you to follow me, don't forget my American retreat in N.-w. York, as I once before instructed you, namely: A tall, isolated house, in the suburbs known as Washington Heights, north of One Hundred and Seventieth street, and on the precipitous river bank, overlooking a railroad, and just west of the Boulevard or last avenue on that side—Eleventh avenue, I think it is called."

CHAPTER XV.

TAKING UP THE THREAD.

"Now, my dear Cathcart," continued the detective, "this is no little of a disappointment for both of us. But you may still be able to furnish me some little information before we separate."

"Oh, with all my heart, major," and the clerk, quite listless now, tilted back his chair and smoked somewhat discontentedly, while half wishing that he had been trained up as a detective. He would show them some fine work, he was certain of it. "Cut away!"

Falconbridge picked up one of the letter envelopes, which he had neglected to stow away, and directed the clerk's attention to the superscription.

"In the first place," said he, "as I remember the 'Shurtlief' address on your register, that handwriting and this are the same. Am I right?"

"Yes," replied Cathcart, waking up a little. "No question about it."

"Now, as to his mysterious companion, the Miss Wanda Manheim."

"Ah, yes, to be sure. Not his niece, but his daughter, by those letters."

"True. Cathcart, how quick you are to piece things together. You wouldn't have made a bad detective yourself."

The clerk flushed with pleasure, his interest keenly renewed by this time, as Falconbridge intended it should be.

"You really think so?"

"As a matter of course. Now as to this Miss Manheim, as we shall continue to designate her."

"Well, major?"

"Did you ever have a look at her handwriting?"

"Never; nor exactly at her face either, for that matter."

"What?"

"Never, 'pon honor, odd as it may seem. It should have been a dazzler, though, judging by her figure, which was simply perfection."

The detective gave an inward groan. Why hadn't he caught a better glimpse of the girl that morning on the pier, when she was signaling the disguised Thug King from the coach?

But then he had asked himself the same impatiently exasperating question time and time again before this, with no supplementary remedy as yet.

"One would think," he observed discontentedly, "that either you or the day clerk might have caught at least a glimpse or two of the young lady's face."

"But we didn't, though," replied Cathcart, not a little regretfully.

"Why?"

"Well, you see, they were only here a three-quarters of a day, anyway."

"But still—"

"And Miss Manheim was almost never out of her room; and even when otherwise, she was either veiled, or half-veiled, or in some way managed to hinder a fair look at her face."

"Still she had to pass to and from the meals they took here."

"You mistake; she always had 'em sent up."

"Then the waiter in attendance, or the chambermaid in her section of the hotel, must have gained a look at her face."

"Neither, so as to give any description of it. I have questioned them, and know. She ate alone in her room, unattended, or solely in Shurtlief's company; and when the chambermaid would be dropping into her room, the young lady would be moping in one of the private parlors, or some other unfrequented nook, impatient to get back to her seclusion."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; strange, but a fact. Had they remained much longer, the mystery would simply have grown intolerable. Every one was remarking upon it, as it was."

"But the theater night following, when they so cleverly gave my little Tommy Dodd the slip?"

"Veiled, with nothing but her chin visible, though magnificently dressed. By Jupiter! what a figure, though."

After a moment's angry reflection, the detective dismissed the matter from his mind, and rose.

"No use!" he grumbled.

The clerk consulted his watch, and also rose, hastily.

"Long past lunch-time, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "But then that cipher-deciphering took time. However, I suppose the cashier managed to fill my place."

He was about to bustle away, when his companion laid a detaining touch on his arm.

"One moment more, Cathcart."

"All right, old fellow."

"You are quite sure 'Kismet' was the word you heard the man mutter last night?"

"Yes, yes; could swear to it."

"That will do, then; and much obliged."

"Don't mention it. Wish I could have been a detective myself."

As they were passing out into the office, which was empty for the moment, the cashier having returned to his own desk in an adjoining compartment, the clerk turned to close the cabinet door behind them.

"As he did so, he suddenly stood riveted to the spot, his eyes a-stare."

"Good Lord! look!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, pointing to the door. "While we were in the room, too."

The detective had no occasion for the injunction, but was also gazing at the door.

It was of smooth, expensive wood, highly polished.

Deeply and freshly-scratched across its burnished surface, a single word, in large, ill-formed letters, went scrawling, and that word—"KISMET!"

The men silently exchanged alarmed glances; or, at least, there was alarm on Cathcart's side.

"Freshly done," he said, "and doubtless with a knife or some other sharp instrument!"

The hotel lobby was deserted for the time being, the guests, regulars and transients, having gone in to lunch.

Falconbridge nodded, and, turning, glanced in through an opposite door to where the cashier, a good-looking, frank-faced young man, was casting up his accounts.

"I say, Hawkins!" called out Cathcart, peremptorily.

"Yes, Mr. Cathcart," and the young man came hurrying in.

"Who has been mutilating this door in this scandalous manner?"

The cashier was already looking on with unaffected amazement.

"The Lord only knows!" he stammered. And then he suddenly struck his forehead.

"By Jingo!" he exclaimed; "I wonder if it could have been that big woman?"

"What woman?" demanded Cathcart, sternly.

"A very large, well-dressed and perhaps middle-aged lady—she was closely veiled—who was looking over the register."

"How long ago?"

"About twenty minutes. I was compelled to return to my own desk, and when I glanced in again, a few minutes ago, she was gone."

"Could she have slipped in behind the counter without your knowledge?"

"How should I know? It seems hardly possible, and yet you can judge for yourself."

Hawkins pointed to the counter-flap entrance between the office and the lobby. "Yes, it might have been done, with a due amount of stealthiness, I suppose. I was very busy at my own desk just then, sir."

Cathcart moodily plumped himself down into his office-chair.

"I wish to God Richards" (the chief clerk) "had been here attending to his own business!"

he growled. "Mr. Crumple" (the proprietor) "will be sure to hold me responsible for this infernal piece of vandalism."

"But what can it mean, sir?" asked Hawkins, still staring at the door.

"How the deuce should I know?" gruffly.

"Ask him—Falconbridge—there. It's his business to solve and detect things."

But Falconbridge could or would only shrug his shoulders, with the most perfect self-possession by this time.

"Ask me something easier," said he, smiling.

"By-by, Cathcart; you should have been a detective yourself, remember."

"I know I should!" muttered the clerk, looking after him half-resentfully as he sauntered away. "I might have made a better fist at it than some chaps who have somehow got a huge reputation. Send one of the porters for a cabinet-maker and grainer, Hawkins. We may be able to doctor up the door before the governor gets a chance to jaw over it."

As for the detective, no sooner was he out of the hotel than, active and alert to his inmost fiber, he made a bee-line for the nearest west side Elevated Railroad Station.

"Tall and isolated house on the river-bank above 170th street and west of the Boulevard, or perhaps Eleventh avenue," he repeated to himself, after taking his seat in a car. "Good enough! a slight clew is better than none."

There was a sudden stoppage of the train at the top of the great, dizzily-high, S-shaped curve at 110th street, where the elevated track made back from the Ninth to the Eighth avenue course.

The detective went out on the forward platform to see if there might be danger impending.

There was, but of a different sort than he apprehended.

Suddenly he felt his neck encircled by a throttling hand that was as of steel.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOUGH TIMES.

THOUGH a man of immense muscular reserve force, the Falcon Detective, for once in his life at least, felt that he was all but helpless—little more than a mere man of wood—in that mysterious and irresistible grip.

He was alone on the car platform, save for the owner of that anaconda clutch upon his neck.

The train was slowly moving once more, its detention having been momentary and trivial.

The ground was over ninety feet below the spidery, aerial structure; not only was the grasp upon his neck tightening every instant, but he felt it, in spite of his resistance, which was all but superhuman, steadily, remorselessly thrusting him out toward the fatal edge.

"Good God!" he thought; "am I in the grip of a demon, or of a pair of giant calipers in Titan hands?"

Not a breath, not an audible movement from the mysterious clutcher at his neck and life!

Though the train was moving faster every instant, it was now upon the highest point of the trestle-work.

Inch by inch he was being forced forward over the side, clutch at the guard-rails as he might, the lattice gate having been already torn open in some invisible way by the same terrible agency that had him in its irresistible grip.

In another instant, before the frightful depths could be materially lessened by the on-rush of the train, he would be hurled into the abyss.

How beautiful the world looked in that last instant, which was suddenly so crammed with thoughts, sensations and memories, as in the case of the drowning man!

Far, far below, the earth, soft and beautiful with the first hintings of spring—a house-top here, a market garden there, workmen singing at their toil, children playing in the vacant house lots, street cars and other vehicles seeming to crawl along the surface streets, flattened against the ground by the lofty bird's-eye view—was spread out like a pictorial map.

And to think that in the next moment, after a hurtling plunge, he would be lifeless, crushed out of recognition, or perhaps horribly maimed but still moving, like a half-smashed insect, on the cruel street or sidewalk stones so far below!

Suddenly, and at the final atom of this portentous moment, a hideous thought, or intuition, flashed upon him like a revelation.

The Strangler—the Thug King himself! Who but he could possess this murderous, this overpowering hand-grip?

Sarcasm of Destiny! had he taken up the pursuit of Joseph Isaacstein's assassin only to become another victim of the same throttling hand?

The thought was maddening.

With a last tremendous effort, even while tottering to his fall on the giddy gliding edge, the detective, without wholly releasing himself from the strangling grip, managed to partly twist around his head.

What did he see?

Not a man, but a woman—or, at least, a terrible veiled being in woman's garb!

A large woman, somberly but expensively cloaked in black from neck to feet, the eyes emitting a baleful fire through the meshes of her veil, the disengaged left hand seen to be gloved, the other, intent upon its iron-throttling work, invisible.

All this in a single inspired-like flash.

Then the devoted detective was uprooted from his last footing, and silently hurled out into space, while the airily-moving serpentine train sped curvingly around the last loop of the S-shaped structure.

Out into space, and then down, down!

And then what was this?

Something, a rope, caught under the victim's armpit, while one of his flying legs seemed to catch a similar support under the crook of the knee.

"Hang on!" yelled a voice from somewhere, as in a dream. "We'll get you!"

Then tearing, rending pains, as if rough cordage were wrenching and rasping him limb from limb, after which consciousness ceased.

Coming to his senses a little later on, Falconbridge found himself comfortably supported by one man, who held his head on his knee, while another was holding a flask of spirits to his lips.

The detective was almost instantly himself, with his accustomed hardy presence of mind.

The men were honest-looking workmen, wearing old hats, jumpers and overalls daubed and stained with reddish-brown paint, their kindly faces alive with sympathy and wonder.

He started to his feet, in spite of their warnings that he might not yet be sufficiently recovered.

A glance at his surroundings explained the situation.

He was still high in the air, on a long and broad painters' platform, swung directly under the iron girders which the two men had been engaged in covering with their preservative rust-proof paint.

Two or three guy-ropes, stretched out from the adjacent trestle-work, explained the extraordinary chance by which he had broken his descent, to be speedily pulled in upon the platform by his rescuers.

"Did you tumble off the train?" the men demanded.

"Yes; that is, the gate was open, and I suppose I must have suddenly lost my head.

"A blessing it wasn't your life with it!" exclaimed one. "A narrow escape from almost certain death doesn't often happen in this world!"

"I believe you, my friend; nor in any other that I ever heard of."

"Aren't you awfully shaken up? Test your arm and leg. They must have got a horrible rasping on the ropes yonder; though, luckily, you had pluck enough to hang on."

Falconbridge obeyed, doubling up and straight-

ening out his strained arm and leg with vigorous movements.

"I'm all right!" he exclaimed, with a long breath of satisfaction and relief. "By Jupiter, I am! With the exception of a slight soreness and stiffness here and there, I'm as good as ever."

Then, after tendering his rescuers the most profuse thanks, even while declining to give them his name, he had so little notion of the affair being made public in connection with his personality, he once more looked around him, and with no little impatience.

"But look here, friends," he cried, "I'm losing time that I can little afford to spare."

"So are we," said one of the men, curtly enough.

The pair of them then coolly resumed their painting, apparently ill-pleased at his refusal to respond to their request for his name; without reflecting perhaps that the detective could have readily smoothed over that asperity, had he chosen, by inventing one for them to order.

"I'm sorry you feel hurt," said Falconbridge, apologetically. "But, old fellows, I do wish you would confer one more favor upon me by telling me how to reach the ground. I'm just hog enough to ask it."

At this sally the workmen laughed good-naturedly once more, and one of them showed him a rope ladder at one end of the platform by which a neighboring column could be reached, after which the iron lattice work on two of its sides could be improvised as a ladder to complete the descent.

"But it requires a cool head, no less than a firm grip," said he, "and you must be still greatly shaken up. 'I fear you can't manage it yet awhile.'"

"Trust me for that," was the confident reply.

And, bidding them good-by and princely good luck, the detective straightway availed himself of the means pointed out, swinging out boldly over the abyss while clutching the rope-ladder hand-over-hand.

They watched him anxiously from their lofty perch until he reached *terra firma*, when, with a parting wave of the hand, he was gone.

Falconbridge lost not another moment in taking a surface car.

Not doubting for an instant that his would-have-been assassin was none other than the Thug King in feminine disguise, he calculated that he had lost just about half an hour by the attempt upon his life, which had been so fortunately, if not providentially, foiled.

"All right," he muttered to himself, "if he deems me to have been dashed to pieces, so much the better, for I am dead certain, at all events, that the curve of the track precluded his looking back to see how I escaped."

He reflected, however, somewhat gloomily upon the master criminal's implied prescience and ubiquity, as evidenced in this apparent divination of his (the detective's) intentions, and the consequent following of him up for the express purpose of murderously thwarting them.

Alighting at 125th street, he took the Tenth Avenue Cable Road, keeping constantly on the alert against being once more shadowed un-awares.

Arriving in the high open country at 170th street, which, for the greater part of its length, was still an incomplete cutting, or an open grass-grown country road, with but a scattering of lonely houses and squatters' rock-perched hovels on either side, he was just jumping off the car when a man passing swiftly along the road to westward attracted his attention.

A second glance satisfied him that it was Giuseppe Malletto, the sinister restaurant waiter.

He hailed him imperatively.

The man, who had made a clumsy attempt at disguising himself, threw one alarmed glance over his shoulder, and then ran like a deer.

"So be it!" thought Falconbridge, who was a thundering expert at a half-mile or mile dash. "It's my legs against yours, Mr. Macaroni."

And he was off in pursuit like a greyhound after a hare.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LONE HOUSE ON THE HEIGHTS.

BUT the Italian was no mean runner, on his own part.

Besides he had a good half a block the start, and, notwithstanding that the detective steadily gained upon him, Eleventh avenue was reached and crossed with Giuseppe fully a hundred yards ahead.

And at this point, just as he darted to one side, and disappeared down a steep slope among a lot of rocks to the right, there was a loud report, and a quantity of earth and stones flew into the air over the spot.

"Oho!" growled the detective, catching his breath; "blasting under way, eh? But if you can stand it, I can." And on he dashed.

On turning down among the rocks, however, the fugitive was no longer to be seen, and then the detective found himself among the blasters.

They looked like Italians themselves, the majority of them, and a hard-looking crew at that—brawny and powerful men, sweating from their rough toil, but for the most part with

brutal faces, who eyed him suspiciously as he paused, panting, among them.

He questioned as to the fugitive with the natural heat of his baffled and hard-pressed condition.

The workmen looked at him stolidly, without a sign, except a tall, comparatively intelligent-looking fellow, yet also ruffianly enough on his own part, who shook his head slowly.

"We no see such a man," he replied, in pretty good English. "Look yourself, signor. Such man no here."

Falconbridge looked around him with a sense of exasperation.

The ground was a series of rough excavations of different sizes and depths, among which the fugitive might easily have baffled pursuit.

A little behind his position was the ragged hole made by that blast he had heard and seen, with its little red warning flag broken-staffed, and half-covered with fallen earth and stones. And all around the rocky sides of the general excavation, perched here and there, to a considerable distance away to the westward, were other little red flags flaunting, either as a present caution of danger, or to become so later on. Truly, not altogether agreeable surroundings, even apart from the associations.

"The deuce!" growled the detective, resignedly. "However, if I've lost him, I've lost him, and that is an end of it."

He was turning to go when he found himself again confronted by the tall foreman, if such he was.

The man held out one hand, with a half-menacing, half-ingratiating expression on his swarthy face, and with the other pointed to a lager beer sign nailed upon a rock-perched shanty not far away to the right.

"Growler!" he said. "We poor Italianos—no account—but we like growlers, signor."

Falconbridge took in the situation at a glance.

The other workmen, twelve or fifteen in all, had closed in around him, with expectant grins or frowns sufficiently expressive of their comprehension of the demand.

The detective laughed, threw the fellow half-a-dollar, and again turned to go.

There was such a shout in chorus, however, that he once more confronted them, hardly knowing what to expect.

But the shout, he perceived, was one of supreme rejoicing over the munificence of the blacksheesh accorded.

The rough, dirty fellows were smiling like so many baskets of chips, and their mouths watering visibly.

Their leader grasped the detective's hand in an ecstasy of gratitude.

"Signor much generous!" he exclaimed. "Man signor chase go over that way," nodding in the direction of the river. "Bad man, even if Italiano. *Scelerato!* villain! Pretend to work in restaurant, but steal, rob, murder on quiet. Giuseppe Malletto. We know. Signor bring him back here, we kill him for signor. Signor much generous!"

There was another shout from the gang, one of whose number was already on his way to the beer shanty, with a huge horse watering-pail in either hand.

The growler was obviously going to be worked on a scale hitherto unheard-of among the blasters.

"So you have found a civil tongue at last!" said Falconbridge to the leader good-humoredly. "But none the less, your information comes too late now."

"Signor so much generous," continued the man, with a secretive look, "I tell him more. Signor in much, great danger."

"Danger!"

The fellow nodded.

"Perhaps it's not so bad a chance that brought me here, after all," thought Falconbridge, to whom it suddenly occurred that these sinister men might have some personal knowledge of the Thug King and his whereabouts. "What danger would you warn me against, my friend?" he asked aloud.

The man pointed to the little red flags flaunting about among the rocks.

"See!" he said. "Blasts almost ready to touch off, all. Danger to signor. See!" he particularized one signal on a rocky point, the furthest one distant, nearly an eighth of a mile away in the direction of the river. "Biggest blast of all. Mined, trained, nearly ready. That go off next—in half-hour—when we shout out. Signor no stay about here; danger."

"Oh, is that all?" exclaimed the detective, not a little disappointed.

"Wait! more!"

The man was looking at him intently, with an additional secretiveness, mixed with something almost like terror, in his flickering half-smile.

"What! more danger?"

"Signor, yes."

"Of another kind?"

"Signor, yes; bad kind—worse kind."

"What is it?"

The giant lowered his voice to a whisper, after first looking nervously around him on every side.

"Tall, slim-like brick house," he whispered,

nodding again in the direction of the river. "No other houses; stand up all alone on high river-bank. Queer house!"

"Oh!" ejaculated the detective, at once absorbingly interested. "Queer house, tall, slim, and standing all alone, eh?"

"Hist! not so loud. Some of these men not good men; do bad things for only money, money. Signor, yes."

"Well, what of it?"

"Bad man at queer house. Sometimes there, sometimes away; most times away. Awful—*orribile!* Europe know him; England know him. He kill, kill, kill, but no get punish. *Orribile!*"

He closed with something like a shudder, and, stretching forth his brawny, grimy hands, made a motion as if strangling something, while contorting his face most gruesomely.

Falconbridge drew the man still further apart from his fellows, and talked with him long and earnestly.

But nothing further could be gathered than that the man, who gave his name as Pietro Rapskali, from Milan, had known of Brookton's terrible reputation abroad, had recently been more or less alarmed at perceiving signs of his baleful presence in the neighborhood of the quarries, and that some of the quarrymen might already have been secretly suborned by the master scoundrel's machinations.

This being all that could be discovered, the detective left yet another donation of the 'growler,' and made his way back to the street.

As he lost sight of the works, shout after shout was being roared up by the blasters, and it was quite evident that he was still the hero of the temporary festivities.

"Perhaps the entire gang," thought Falconbridge, "even including this Rapskali himself, are secretly in the Thug King's interest. Who can tell?"

He soon came in view of the house he was seeking.

In appearance and locality it was exactly as described in the letter.

Tall, narrow, of red brick, much weather-worn, and of three stories and an attic, it stood in a neglected garden, including a few trees, that terminated directly on the verge of a high wooded bluff overlooking the Hudson River Railroad, directly underneath, and the stately magnificent river beyond, while the western end of the blasting ground was across the boulevard from its front, quite near at hand.

It might have been a cozy dwelling at some period in its history, but now had the appearance of having long been deserted, while, barring the beer shanty mentioned, there was scarcely another house within gunshot of the place.

"I wonder who is its ostensible owner," thought the detective. "That must be inquired into."

And he approached the place with the utmost precaution.

CHAPTER XVIII. ANOTHER REBUFF.

FORTUNATELY for the detective, the country surrounding the lone house on the bluff was plentifully supplied with trees, but few of which however, had yet begun to bud in the influence of the mild March air.

By taking advantage of these in his approaches, he presently managed to obtain a critical view of the house on every side, without the risk, as he hoped, of being perceived by any chance lurker or watcher from within its walls.

It seemed quite as abandoned as it was forbidding and desolate-looking.

Even the windows of the two upper stories, whose shutters were open, somehow seemed to add, if anything, to the staring forlornness of the house.

At last the detective ventured to approach the back door, which was more sheltered from observation than the front entrance by the spreading branches of a huge old apple tree.

As he did so, a glance back and down over the garden bank, showed him some track-men at work far below, whose voices he could hear as they talked together over their work, and the next moment there was the hissing, thundering rush of a passing train.

There was a sense of companionship, remote, it is true, but better than none, in these sights and sounds.

The detective tried the door.

To his surprise, it was unfastened, and yielded at once.

Under ordinary circumstances, the detective would have regarded this as indicative of danger at the outset.

But now, so eager had he become to investigate, he merely congratulated himself over the seeming 'neglect' that rendered his entrance so easy, and he forthwith stole into the house with the soft-footedness of a cat.

The rooms of the first floor, which were plainly visible by means of a number of chinks in the closed shutters, were entirely empty, with no signs of their having been occupied in a long time.

The cellar which he next proceeded to examine, gave similar evidences of disuse.

However, there was an odd feature in the front masonry—a great rough slab set in the center of the wall, which at this point sounded hollow to his cautious test—which he resolved to investigate more thoroughly later on.

Returning to the first or ground floor, he set a noiseless foot on the stair, to ascend, when he suddenly paused.

Falconbridge felt himself abruptly impressed with one of those mysterious premonitions of possible ill, which comes to all of us occasionally in a long life's experience, but which are quite as often found to be misleading as otherwise.

This had been the teaching of his own experience.

He accordingly shook off the feeling, which, however, prompted him to place his hand reassuringly upon his revolver, after which he ascended the stair with renewed confidence.

Wide, bright and empty, with the chamber doors open, and the afternoon sunlight pouring into rooms and corridors through numerous unblinded windows, the entire floor was cheerfully vacant and innocent-looking, the bare floor-boards being thickly coated with dust.

But hark! was not that a step, or a movement of some kind on the next floor above?

No; he listened again with his foot once more upon the rising steps.

Not a sound nor a breath, save his own.

He must have been mistaken.

But none the less it was with his hand on his revolver, and his eyes looking in every direction at once, that he crept on up.

Then a long breath of relief to find the third floor as bright, bare and vacant as the one he had just quitted.

But a brief examination showed the explorer that it was less innocent of signs of a recent occupancy.

He discovered a cot bedstead in the rear apartment; the chimney grate was full of ashes; there were even indications of a stove having been set up, perhaps not long before; and, upon opening a closet door, there were revealed some articles of feminine wear hanging from the pegs at the back, together with some others on shelves at the side.

Almost startled at his discovery, Falconbridge, as a preliminary precaution, quickly turned away from the closet, and, once more with his hand on his revolver, bent his head and listened, "with his soul in his ears."

Not a sound!

"I'll first make sure," he said to himself, "of having no danger in my rear, at all events."

He reclosed the closet, and passed from room to room with the most minute observance.

Nothing!

With the exception of a pair of delicate rubber boots—evidently intended for a child, or for a woman with exquisitely small feet—lying dustily in one corner of the large front room, all the other apartments of this floor—four in all—were as empty and unsuggestive as those underneath.

Then he went into the garret.

A single large, desolate lumber-room, with sloping bare rafters and forbidding rough walls of unplastered brick, floodingly lighted by a gable window front and rear, and some old packing-cases, apparently empty, scattered here and there.

That was all.

The detective drew a long breath of pleasure and relief.

His ill-omened impression had vanished. He had the house to himself. He had even taken the precaution to secure the kitchen door by which he had entered, and to assure himself of the front door's fastenings. He could now investigate that closet in the back room next below, without danger of a mysterious attack from behind.

Or, at least, such was his impression, in this moment of pleasure and relief—almost of victory.

"But why this feeling?"

Had he not taken up this day's adventure in the express, though faint, hope of chancing upon the mysterious Thug King himself, and perchance of effecting his capture?

True; but, though a bold man—never a more fearless one lived, in fact—the Falcon Detective, since his recent awful experience at the S-shaped curve of the Elevated Railroad—his remembered helplessness in that iron, remorseless, all but invisible grip—had come to the sensible conclusion that hereafter he must meet his criminal enemy face to face, and a revolver in hand, or the game would be irretrievably lost.

And how, in the light of that experience, to meet such an enemy face to face, save by the exercise of prudent precautions little short of the superhuman?

Was there any disguise the man could not assume, in defiance of any detective skill? Was he not seemingly ubiquitous, with a divination beyond? And that strangling clutch! where was its rival in the world?

So, it will be perceived that Falconbridge, while unshaken in his confidence of ultimately running this master criminal to earth, was, for the time being at least, fully content to feel that

he was in no danger of being again surprised while following up his clew.

Accordingly, in this comparatively agreeable state of mind, he now returned to the next floor below the garret, and once more opened the closet of the large rear room.

Its contents proved to be even more interesting than he had anticipated, even apart from their nature, as having presumably belonged to Dagmar Gersacht, *alias* Miss Wanda Manheim, the Thug King's daughter.

The articles suspended from the pegs embraced several expensive dress-skirts, little worn but draggled and unkempt; a satin waist, almost new, but ripped or cut down one side, *as by a knife-thrust*; a rich corset, correspondingly mutilated; and some articles of costly and but little soiled underwear, which the detective's innate sense of modesty forbade a more than cursory examination of.

However, the waist and corset were a different matter.

After satisfying himself that the cuts in the two articles corresponded, he examined the bodice more closely.

It was of scarlet satin, richly embroidered and lace-trimmed, externally, while the inner sides were of white silk.

The detective started.

Dark red stains, doubtless of blood, along the white inner edges of the cut!

Yes, there could be no doubt about it, and the knife-slash that had caused it must have been a powerful one, for the adjacent whalebones had been not only ripped out of their seams, but actually cut through, completely severed, in more places than one.

Falconbridge began to experience a sense of horror.

Could the Thug King—perhaps through a brooding feeling of insecurity over her knowledge of his murder of the diamond-merchant—have murdered his own daughter?

A slight sound, real or fancied, directly behind him.

Dropping the bodice, Falconbridge turned with electric celerity, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER XIX.

FACE TO FACE WITH DEATH ONCE MORE.

SILENCE and the sunlit room, empty save for his own presence, still.

He must have been mistaken, he said to himself.

However, the detective made a careful re-examination of the adjoining rooms, to reassure himself, before continuing his examination of the closet.

"What a timid ass I am becoming," was his muttered self-chiding. "Humiliating as it may be, I can't get over that adventure on the Elevated Road. I seem to have grown suspicious of my own shadow from that moment."

Once more at the open closet, he next fell to inspecting the articles on the shelf at its side.

There was a box of lace handkerchiefs, some of them soiled, and containing a French sachet, emitting a delicate perfume. There was a pair of expensive shoes, considerably worn, and bearing a Paris maker's trade-stamp on the upper's inner edge, which might have fitted the exquisitely dainty feet for whom the rubbers in the front room had been designed.

Then there was a large plush-covered toilet box, containing a brush, comb, button-hook, a bottle of cologne, an odd garter-clasp of silver filagree work, and other trifles of *l'empire secret des belles femmes*, and bearing on its lid a silver plate engraved with the monogram "D. G."—instantly suggesting Dagmar Gersacht as at least the genuine or world-name of the owner.

Then there were various other articles of a kindred nature, but scarcely worth more than passing glance, until the searcher came upon a small ivory casket, evidently designed as a jewel-box, the opening of which occasioned him a palpitation of satisfaction and surprise.

And yet it contained only a letter, half-finished and crumpled.

But such a letter!

The detective unfolded and flattened it out between his hands in much excitement.

It was a painful scrawl, without signature, but bearing the date of the *second day following* the murder of Joseph Isaacstein, and was sprinkled with blood.

"I feel that this hurt will be my death, but I forgive you, my father."

"Alas! was I to blame that I shrunk instinctively from a suspicion of your terrible crime—perhaps of similar crimes that have preceded it? For can I help reading the newspapers, and the awful things they say of you and your past reputation? Moreover, could I help thinking over our relations in the past, your long and mysterious absences from me, your hard, strange looks when I questioned you, and then piecing this and that together in the terrified silence of my poor heart?"

"However, why did you let that terrible man come here? But I forgive you, my father! I wish I might live to become world, even crime-hardened, in my sympathy for you, that I might stretch forth my woman's strength and cunning to assist, to comfort, to shield, perhaps to save."

"But I am afraid it is too late now."

"This stinging, smarting wound, and no doctor, no surgeon, no nurse!"

"Oh, the silences, the loneliness of this dreadful

house! It is worse, infinitely worse than the harsh convent seclusion in which my child and girl life was entombed, but whose religious teachings you so scornfully, sedulously counteracted, implanting in my soul the desperateness of atheism and disbelief, which is now, in this awful hour, my desolation and despair!

"But I forgive you, my father.
"My wound bleeds, the convulsive pain recurs, the pencil quivers in my failing hand."

"I shall not complete this letter. Proscribed and hunted as you are, you may yet find the hardihood, the lingering tenderness, to come here and see me before I die. If not, you will some day, perhaps, discover it in this little casket, in which I shall hide it away."

"Then you will know, if you do not know it yet, how I loved, pitied and forgave you."

"Oh, that horrible man! I charge you to discontinue your trust—Giuseppi—sell you out—faithless! But my brain—it is reeling—I can write no more."

The letter was in French, of which the foregoing is nearly a literal translation.

What a letter, and what a prize!

The detective reflected.

If the young woman had really died, which seemed most probable, it stood to reason, he thought, that it was of a wound inflicted by her criminal-sire.

If she had recovered, why here in his possession was the specimen of her handwriting he had been so anxious to obtain.

A feeble scrawl, to be sure, but thoroughly feminine, and sufficiently intact in its characteristics for the use of an expert.

As for the strange tone of the letter, what was he to think of that?

What a strange mingling of tenderness, desperateness, and perhaps ingrained or fundamental unprincipledness, to a certain degree at least!

Was the girl vicious already (if alive), or only willing to become so for her demon father's sake?

He rather inclined to the former view, with certain qualifications.

And then the third party, that "horrible man," the Giuseppi so darkly alluded to in the writing!

The detective had not an instant's doubt that the spy-waiter of the German restaurant was the individual referred to.

"My intuitions were true!" he fretfully muttered. "S'death! why didn't I choke the breath out of him when I had him by the throat there in the *cabinet particulier*, or at least fix up a charge on which to hermetically jug him indefinitely? It would have been one reptile the less in this cobra-hunt. However, I may find occasion to call at that tenement-house address he gave me as his home."

He had put the letter carefully away in his pocket, and was taking a last look into the closet.

Suddenly a slight sound behind him, this time an unmistakable one, again caused him to wheel in his tracks with lightning-like rapidity, pistol in hand.

Not a second too soon!

George Brookton, the Thug King, silently, menacingly confronted him.

He seemed to have risen out of the floor, or to have stepped out of the white partition wall against which he was standing.

No womanish disguise, no disguise of any description now; not even the English or German-appearing Shurtlief personality, in which he had stepped off the steamer, and subsequently appeared at the St. Bride's Hotel.

There he was in all his baleful, powerful, hideous genuineness—the crime-written, diabolical face, the same whose counterfeit presentment had half-paralyzed the sensitive diamond-merchant in the Rogues' Gallery of the Paris Prefecture of Police at the opening of our story—a stormy, remorseless light in the terrible eyes, a mocking, murderous smile on the stern lips, the hands—ungloved now—those ominous hands, strong, resistless, fatal, crooked like the talons of a mighty bird, outstretched with such a threatening air as was dreadful to contemplate.

The Falcon Detective had never been confronted by the master criminal thus wholly undisguised before.

Hardy and danger-tried as he was, he might now have been momentarily, or more or less, appalled by the terrible nature of the man's appearance, together with the associations clinging, like blood-fattened flies, about his personality, had he given himself time to think or contemplate the situation.

But this the startling unaccountableness of the situation prevented him from doing.

Oblivious to everything but this, and with a precipitation he did not remember to have ever been guilty of before, he brought his revolver to a level on the instant, and fired, point-blank, for the Thug King's heart.

Did the creature bear a demon's charmed life, or did he wear a concealed coat of bullet-proof mail?

At all events, he made a derisive gesture, accompanied by a harsh, croaking laugh.

"Quick, Beppo!" he called out, "I may want you."

And then he launched himself forward, with those terrible strangling hands hungrily outstretched.

But Falconbridge was too quick for him, for the movement at least.

Evading the onslaught by a swift, gliding movement to one side, he reached the hall-door behind, and fired another shot, at less than arm's-length, at Brookton's side just as the latter wheeled, with a sort of snarling roar.

It was of no better effect than its predecessor.

And then, as the detective backed into the hall-passage, still presenting his ineffectual weapon, and with the other crouching for a second spring, Giuseppi Malletto suddenly appeared at the head of the stairway, leveled shot-gun in hand.

A third shot from the detective's revolver differently directed—a snap-shot, in fact—found better success.

It broke the stock of the shot-gun, knocking the weapon out of the Italian's hands.

But Giuseppi at once drew a stiletto, and then, as the two men charged upon him at one and the same instant, Falconbridge hastily retreated along the passage into the front room, closely followed.

"Is your diabolical head a mask, no less than your body?" cried the detective. "I'll test it, any way!"

With that he fired yet again, this time with the utmost deliberation (and he was a dead shot under any and all conditions) and point-blank at the Thug King's face.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ROCK BLAST.

THE light smoke-curl of the detective's revolver's last discharge floated away, and was dissipated in the sunny air of the apartment.

His intended victim remained standing before him, uninjured.

George Brookton had accomplished a feat for which even Falconbridge could have admired him—a feat that might not once succeed in ten thousand trials.

Studying the eye and the trigger-finger of his assailant, and adjusting his own movements thereby with incredible address and nicety, he had actually dodged the bullet, which had, however, seared the cheek of the Italian, standing behind him, and evoking from the fellow a slight cry of pain.

Then there was a double, combined rush, and the detective was in the strangler's overpowering grasp.

Nimble, athletic and muscular as he was, it was as if he had been suddenly caught up in the maw of a whirlwind or a waterspout.

A wild, momentarily successful resistance, and then he was forced up against the wall as if by a battering-ram, and then the twining, sinewy, bony clutch of the Thug King's professional right hand was closed upon his throat like a tightening chain collar of steel.

Falconbridge at once began to grow black in the face, and though he determined to retain consciousness until the very last, he felt that in but a few seconds—barring some interposition of which there did not seem the ghost of a chance—he must be done for.

"Enemy! sleuthing dog of a detective!" growled Brookton, in that hoarse, gurgling unnatural voice of his. "It is my favorite weapon—the hand, the strangling hand!"

But at this deadly juncture the Italian, who had posted himself at one of the front windows, called out softly and warningly:

"Have a care! have a care! Those shots have been heard. Several men and a woman are watching the house suspiciously from the road."

Brookton was nothing if not discreet where his own security was concerned.

Slightly relaxing his grip so as to permit his victim to breathe a little, he threw him upon the floor and placed his mighty knee crushingly upon his breast.

"Well?" he said, looking up anxiously after a pause.

The Italian had seated himself on the window-ledge and lighted a cigarette to disarm suspicion.

"They are moving on now," he replied. "But it is well to continue to be careful, maestro."

"Yes, yes!"

"Ha! they are running now. Reason enough! The nearest red flag has been raised and lowered thrice. Our friends, the blasters, are getting ready to touch off their big blast."

"So! keep on the watch, Malletto."

"Yes, signor."

A new idea seemed to have suddenly impressed *le Monarque des Etrangleurs*.

Still keeping his victim crushingly prostrate with his knee, he in the first place, after altogether relinquishing his choking clutch, produced a long heavy cord.

Then, chancing to spy the lady's rubber boots within reach, he drew one of them toward him.

"Your dagger!" he demanded of the Italian. It was given him.

He then proceeded, very expertly, to slice out several broad oval-shaped strips from the leg of the boot.

With these, together with some pieces of the cord, he speedily improvised a very effectual gag.

The next instant he had it over the helpless detective's mouth, pushing harshly in between the lips and the teeth, and tautly secured with a hard knot at the back of the neck.

He then, with the remainder of the cord, bound him so deftly, hand and foot, that the unfortunate detective was like a log of wood.

"What is the lookout now?" demanded Brookton of his assistant.

"The road is clear at present."

"The blast?"

"It will probably be fired in ten minutes more."

"How do you know that?"

"It is always about fifteen minutes between the waving of the flag and the final warning shout, and about five have elapsed already."

"Good! Go down to the gate, and apprise me if the coast is absolutely clear of prying observers."

Giuseppi started to obey, but paused and turned at the door, his face the picture of devouring curiosity and cunning.

"Maestro!"

"Well?" impatiently.

"Do tell me what fate you have in reserve for the American fox-hound!"

The Thug King smiled his terrible smile, which was infinitely more forbidding than an ordinary form of hate.

Then he pointed significantly, first at his bound victim, and then out through the window, with a comprehensiveness that seemed to take in the entire scope of the blasting-ground beyond the road.

"Can't you guess?" he asked, with his harsh, croaking demoniac chuckle.

After a puzzled look, Giuseppi did guess.

Then, with a paroxysm of shrill, womanish laughter, while holding his sides, and cackling out, "Rich, rich! *Corpo del Christo*, it is rich!" he disappeared.

The Thug King stood silently watching him from the window as he made his way along the neglected garden walk to the road-gate.

Helpless as he was, and desperate to boot, Falconbridge had retained consciousness and presence of mind from the first.

But now, in spite of his nerve, a cold perspiration started out upon his forehead and over his bound body from neck to feet.

He had understood, no less than Brookton's Italian minion, by a sort of instinct.

"Good God!" he thought; "I see it all. The fiend is going to place me, bound and gagged as I am, over that big prepared blast that Pietro Rapsalli particularly warned me against. He will calculate the time so as to have me blown into bloody fragments perhaps a minute or two after he has deposited me over the mine, I am lost!"

Still, by an immense effort, he kept up his nerve.

At last Brookton must have received the signal that the coast was clear.

He turned from the window in a brusque, business-like way.

He then caught up the helpless detective under one arm with as much ease and as little concern as though he were no more than a bundle of dried sticks.

He passed down the stairs and out of the house with his burden, unbolting the front door to do so, and nonchalantly rejoined his companion at the gate.

The road and immediately surrounding open country seemed completely deserted.

The luckless detective, who had some freedom of vision, in spite of the unceremoniousness with which he was "toted along," as they say in some localities down South and out West, strained his eyes here and there in the hope that some one might take note of his plight.

In vain!

Not a friendly stranger or chance wayfarer was to be seen.

Even the beer shanty, on the not distant rock, which almost always betrayed some signs of life about its dilapidated porch or ramshackle yard, was at this portentous moment as lifeless and undemonstrative as a tomb.

The Fates seemed to have prepared everything in favor of the intending murderer, and in opposition to his powerless victim.

Falconbridge closed his eyes, and still strove to be calm, not to give in, to be brave to the last.

"You can follow me at a distance, while still keeping up your lookout," said Brookton to Giuseppi, "if you are still curious to see the end of this little trick."

The Italian did so, apparently in much anticipating glee, and the Thug King, unconcernedly crossing the road with his novel burden, struck up in among the rocks of the wild open lots opposite.

"You needn't mind watching any longer," the latter presently called back to his follower. "We are safe enough from observation now."

"I should say so," said Giuseppe, joyfully, overtaking his master.

Presently the Thug King paused, and looked around him, with a sort of grunt of satisfaction.

"Couldn't be a better or more secluded spot for this sort of picnic," he observed, with his

hyena-like laugh. "Lend a hand, Beppo. The last signal may come at any moment."

The detective felt himself gently deposited on his back, on what seemed to be a heap of rubbish and stones.

He felt instinctively that it was the top, or crown of the big blast.

Almost instantly there was the last alarm—a chorus of warning shouts on the part of the blasters in the distance—and he heard Brookton and the Italian taking to their heels.

CHAPTER XXI.

ALMOST.

FALCONBRIDGE gave himself up for lost, and closed his eyes, fully expecting to be blown into eternity in another minute.

But, *mirabile dictu*, there only came a comparatively light, jarring shock, shaking up the stone heap at one side of him, and he suddenly felt the arm and leg on that side freed of their bonds.

In an instant, the apparently doomed man, with the superhuman acuteness resulting from his tense-drawn nerves, realized the situation.

He had occasionally noticed in blast-explosions that a comparatively light shock, something like the one that had just occurred, would precede the main result by a second or two, probably occasioned by loose powder contiguous to the cartridge in the buried pocket of the rock.

This was what had opportunely happened in the present instance.

But not a second, not an atom of time was to be spared.

Rolling himself off the heap by a spasmodic movement, he at the same time tore at his gag and the loosened cords with his disengaged hand.

He felt himself fall in the soft spot, and then rolling down a slight decline into a sort of semi-darkness.

Then, as he struggled into a sitting posture, came the blast.

The explosion was simply terrific, shaking the solid ground beneath him.

Glancing out of his chance-cave, or nook, he could see the rocks and logs, upon which he had been lying, hurtling high into the air—a volcano in miniature—while the air surrounding him was momentarily impregnated with an overpowering sulphurous smell.

It quickly passed, however.

Looking around him, he found himself in a sort of low cave, or rough tunnel-entrance.

As he instinctively shrunk further back into it, he heard voices.

"I don't see any blood or human fragments anywhere," said one, which he recognized as Malletto's. "Where is he, maestro?"

"Blown into bits, you fool!" Brookton's rasping voice made reply. "It takes dynamite, mixed with giant powder, to make small potatoes of a chap."

"Oh!"

"Come along, and be quick about it. The workmen will be here in a minute, and, though some of them are one with us, we mustn't be found lurking here."

Then there was a hurried retreating of steps.

This was presently followed by other and more numerous steps approaching.

Peering out from his place of safety and concealment, the detective could see the workmen, headed by their towering leader, gathering about the blast-excavation.

He listened eagerly.

The professional instinct was once more dominant, and he was anxious to learn just to what extent the Thug King's influence might reach among this dangerous foreign element.

"An excellent scoop!" commented Pietro Rapscailli, in his native tongue. "We have never made a cleaner blast."

"But," said one of his companions, "I don't see anything unusual."

"Nor do I," remarked another.

"Nonsense!" cried Pietro, angrily. "We had all guzzled too much at the strange signor's growler, and your eyes must have deceived you, Mario."

"Not so!" cried the second speaker. "I can swear that I saw two men a minute or two before the rip-up."

"I, too!" said another. "One of them was our great maestro of the lone house over yonder, and the other that slippery rascal, Giuseppe Malletto whom the strange signor was chasing."

"Yes," eagerly, "and the great maestro was carrying something that looked like a human form."

"Well, well," growled Pietro, apprehensively, "whatever it was, you know that we are not to concern ourselves with his doings, however shady."

"Peste! and why not?" put in a fresh speaker. "He has not staked us for a week, and the lucky night-job he promised us from the very first is not yet forthcoming."

"I tell you, we are not to meddle!" cried Pietro, still more nervously. "Body of God! can we forget what he was in Italy and elsewhere abroad?"

"No, no; Pietro is right. It will not do to meddle with the great maestro's affairs."

And then the men broke up their group and went away.

The detective would willingly have learned more, but he none the less congratulated himself on what had come to his understanding.

Now, not deeming it prudent to venture forth as yet, and with his natural passion for inquiry to the fore, he cautiously made his way back into the gloom of his retreat.

He struck a wax taper match, with a store of which he always went provided.

He found himself at the mouth of an old tunnel, or culvert, apparently long in disuse.

The masonry was broken and moldy, and, as far as he could peer into the interior, it seemed forbidding and unpromising as a new field of exploration.

But, before his paper quite burnt itself out, his eye alighted upon an object that caused him a thrill of satisfaction.

It was a lantern, snugly stowed away between two fragments of rock.

Striking another match, he inspected his treasure trove.

The lantern was of a very primitive sort, and provided with the stub of a candle, instead of a lamp, but it was serviceable.

He soon had it lighted, and then possessed himself of another object which he chanced to discover near it.

It was a heavy, short-handled sledge, or quarryman's hammer.

"If I'd only had this in lieu of my revolver!" he regretfully thought; "I doubt if that demon could have dodged its stroke, as he did that last bullet of mine. The fiend!"

He now advanced into the tunnel.

The ground and sides were very much broken up, almost impassable in places, and yet there were signs of its having been traversed, perhaps frequently, and recently at that.

Its trend was on the level, and in the direction of the river.

After a toilsome passage of about five hundred yards, or a quarter of a mile, as near as he could guess, the detective suddenly found himself at the tunnel's end.

It had proved an immensely long *cul de sac*.

Further progress was debarred, however, not by masonry, but by a smooth, upright surface, perhaps the side of an immense sunken rock.

A bitter feeling of disappointment came over the detective, though he could scarcely have told what he had anticipated as the termination of the subterranean passage.

Suddenly it occurred to him to strike the rock with his hammer.

He did so, and it gave forth a hollow, ringing sound.

Then, like a revelation, there rushed upon him the recollection of the flat-surfaced, hollow-sounding rock which he had observed set in the cellar-wall of the lone house on the river-bank.

He struck the obstruction again, this time a thundering blow.

It trembled.

Then he began to tap it lightly all around the sides, in the hope of touching some hidden spring.

Eureka!

He chanced to do so at last, and the great stone creakingly turned inward upon its concealed hinges.

Then it was but a step over a rugged threshold, and Falconbridge found himself unmistakably once more in the cellar of the ill-omened house.

The mystery of the Thug King and his follower having come upon him from behind, for all his preliminary precautions in the matter of locking the doors and assuring himself of the emptiness of the house, was now as clear as day.

Still leaving the rock-door open, he now, as an additional precaution, waited in silence, while listening intently.

If the villains had re-entered the house, the noise of that one thundering blow upon the obstruction could scarcely fail to have placed them on their guard.

Not a sound!

He closed the passage, and set out upon a re-exploration of the premises.

CHAPTER XXII.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

HAVING satisfied himself that the house was once again wholly deserted, save for his own presence, the detective laid away his hammer and lantern, and then lost no time in quitting the place, by the back-door by which he had first entered it.

The sun had set when he emerged out upon the river-bank, and the chill of evening was already in the air.

Not willing to be seen quitting the locality, or rather perfectly willing to be considered permanently disposed of by his enemies, he seated himself under a tree down the sloping bluff at the back of the garden, and waited for the dusk.

A train of passenger-cars thundered and rumbled along the iron track far below his position; then a freight train, and then another.

Beyond, the broad bosom of the noble stream caught the last flashes of the sunset on its majestic swell, and beyond that rose the picturesque

ramparts of the palisades, with the stretch of red and gold glory crowning their long and irregular summits.

But it was not upon these pleasing features that the Falcon Detective, so freshly out of the very jaws of death which his terrible enemy had designed for him, could place his attention.

He saw, but noted not, his thoughts meanwhile busying themselves with somber and varied reflections.

Ten years earlier in his stormy career, he would have shuddered at what he had passed through; and, even as it was, he could not for the moment look back upon his hair-breadth escapes without a gloomy and despondent feeling.

Was this master-criminal no less untrapable, untakable and unconquerable than ubiquitously alert, watchful, and unscrupulous as to how deeply or often he dipped his hands in human blood?

He remembered how often he had held justice at bay, outwitting it at last in every instance up to his final murder, by an intellectual guard-ship, that was no less his characteristic than his unparalleled nerve and desperation.

Should he ever succeed in this golden dream of his detective career, of capturing him alive and single-handed?

Would it not be better, safer, to call in the aid of the regular police detective force at this critical juncture?

For the time being, at least, it must stand to reason that the Thug King would regard him (Falconbridge) finally disposed of, howsoever he might be mystified at the latter's reappearance on the world's scene after his apparent precipitation to certain death from the loftily curving Elevated train?

But was he so sure that his woman-garbed assailant, in that adventure, was one and the same with the Thug King?

Ah, no doubt of that!

There was an identity in those invincible hands, that strangling clutch, the seeming effortlessness of that all-but superhuman muscularity, that there could be no mistaking.

Of course, the ease with which the detective's intentions had been divined, together with the readiness with which the woman's disguise had been assumed and discarded, could still be only explained by the vaguest inference, though still, in the light of detective experience, it was not an unsolvable mystery.

But the question recurred again and again to Falconbridge: Could and should he still pursue the herculean task alone?

Yes!

He struck his breast, his dejection partly dissipating as he heard the rustle of that strange letter of the dying Dagmar Gersacht rustle, intact, in the pocket in which he had secured, while he also thought hopefully of the assistance that his sturdy and shrewd little auxiliary, Tommy Dodd, might be able to afford him.

"Yes!" he muttered, the brave color flashing into his dark cheeks. "I am a weak coward to have lost heart for a single instant. Alone—alone and unaided by the police—or death at the monster's hand! My compact with Joseph Isaacstein's granddaughter, my very manhood cries out to me!"

Dusk had fallen, and he rose, guardedly setting out at once for a tramp to the nearest Elevated Station, as being more prudent than to avail himself of the cable cars.

While passing once more the sunken blasting-ground, roaring songs and shouts in Italian from the little beer shanty on the rock apprised him that the growler which he had initiated was still circulating freely.

"Ruffianly wretches!" muttered the detective. "How I should like to know the true nature and extent of their connection with the Thug King! But an investigation of that scoundrel, Malletto's, antecedents, together with the proprietary history of that evil house, may help me to an understanding."

Then, as he walked on, the thought of Leah Gersacht, and his promised interview with her that evening, brought back the French maid, Justine Chapelle, and the Spanish adventuress, Madame Vasquez, puzzlingly before his mind.

That the latter was in some way intimately connected with Brookton, he had not a shadow of a doubt.

But was Justine her creature, introduced into Leah's service for sinister reasons, prompted to the adventuress by the Thug King himself?

Self-questioning upon self-questioning, and still but a deepening of the general mystery as yet!

Arriving in the neighborhood of the Hotel d'Amsterdam, his first move was to proceed quietly to his lodgings.

Here, after partaking of a hearty meal, sent up to him from a near-at-hand eating-house, he devoted himself to his toilet.

When he emerged from the house, between eight and nine o'clock, it was in the character of an exquisite or dude, of a decidedly Parisian flavor.

His perfect knowledge of the French language and manners would enable him to support the deception to the full, and, so far as appearances went, it was extremely doubtful if the keenest

observer, perhaps with the exception of Tommy Dodd, would be able to penetrate the disguise.

Indeed, as the event proved, Tommy himself was momentarily deluded in the present instance.

At all events, as the detective, came in hand, glass in eye, was leisurely strolling toward the doorway, with a keen and guarded eye to right and left, Tommy, who was duly watching for his master's return in a neighboring doorway, did not at first recognize him when addressed.

Then the truth dawned upon him.

"Ob, it is you at last, boss," exclaimed the little fellow. "How glad I am you are come!"

"And so am I glad to be back," said the detective, smiling. "But why are you glad, Tommy?"

"Big jinks with the old gal, her green parrot, and the French maid."

"Explain."

"Not here, boss; there isn't time nor privacy enough, and we mustn't be seen together at the Amsterdam again, notwithstanding your rig."

"How does it strike you?"

"As simply perfect, and I ought to be a judge, as you know."

"Good! Come with me."

A few minutes later they were installed in an up-stairs private supper-room of a popular French restaurant, a few blocks away, in which Falconbridge was reasonably certain that even the diabolical divination, or prescience of Brookton could not track them, with a bottle of *vin d'ordinaire* and glasses before them.

"Cut away with your story first," commanded Falconbridge, "and boil it down. You know I have another appointment with Miss Gersacht for this evening."

Tommy Dodd obeyed with his customary promptness.

In just as few words as he could he gave his bell-boy's experience of the day, together with the test commission he was supposed to be on, for the purpose of making his report to Madame Vasquez concerning the detective's movements.

Falconbridge heard him through with the sphinx-like gravity, which had by this time asserted itself as his leading characteristic.

"You have done admirably," was his comment. "And the Vasquez and the pretty Justine are thoroughly intimate on the sly, eh?"

"Thick as two thieves, boss."

"And you will be able to report my movements to her after I shall have given you an account of my afternoon's experiences?"

"Certainly, boss."

"But how will she be able to know whether you report them correctly or not?"

Tommy scratched his head, and then, after helping himself to the wine, he looked up brightly.

"How will she know?" he repeated.

"That is my question, Tommy."

"Why, by learning it from her secret pal, the Thug King, of course."

"Ah! you, too, believe in her connection with him, then?"

"And the French girl, too. Else how account for the way they let themselves out before me?"

"True. Who can the woman be?"

"The Lord only knows, boss, and he won't tell—just yet."

"Here goes, then."

And the detective forthwith recounted his own extraordinary experiences.

CHAPTER XXIII.

REVELATIONS FOR LEAH GERSACHT.

THE boy, who had thoroughly patterned himself after his master, listened as undemonstratively as the latter would have done had their attitudes been reversed.

"Boss, it's a screamer—looks a good-deal like old times, only a little tougher," was Tommy's sole comment when the story was finished. "Now let me think how I shall manage my report to the old gal."

"You must think quickly then," and the detective consulted his watch. "Past nine already."

"I have it. Ha, ha! Stamped in the tablets of my brain, and warranted fast colors."

"Well?"

"Just before the assault upon you on the Elevated, did you chance to remark any boy of about my size and build among your fellow-passengers?"

"Let me see," reflective. "Yes, come to think of it, I did."

Tommy rubbed his hands with a professional air.

"Bully!" he ejaculated. "Particularize, my liege, particularize."

"It was a little German peddler, with a basket of suspenders, neck-ties and similar wares."

"Just the thing! The luck jumps, the luck jumps."

And the boy's shrewd little eyes fairly danced with satisfaction.

"What's your idea?" asked Falconbridge.

"Don't you see? I'm the German peddler on a rabbit's track."

"Ah! I begin to understand."

"Yes. And I only have you at last (barring

follerin' you into the evil house, which of course would be out of all plausibility) after hiding behind some rocks, and seeing you blown into smithereens by the rock-blast."

Falconbridge nodded approvingly.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "Couldn't be better! Be off with you now. You must be interesting the Vasquez woman in your report, before I send up my card to Miss Gersacht."

"All right, boss." The boy started up. "But say, shall I make a long story of it, so as to keep the old gal from dropping in on Miss Gersacht while you are there?"

"Not necessarily. After I shall have had my confidential talk with Miss Gersacht, I sha'n't care whether the Vasquez puts in an appearance or not. In fact," reflectively, "I would rather prefer it."

"Short and sharp's the word, then."

"Stay! If you could manage for the Vasquez to request Justine's company at an early stage of your recital, it would be well."

"Trust me for that!"

"That will do."

Tommy hurried away.

Ten minutes later, a hotel servant handed Miss Gersacht a gentleman's card bearing the freshly-written address in the fashionable European, or ultra-slanting, pointed hand:

"M. ACHILLE FLAMEAUX,
19 Rue de Malsherbes, Paris."

She read the name with surprise, not recognizing it.

"Is the gentleman below?" she questioned of the servant.

"Yes, ma'm. Says he's an old friend, newly arrived. Hopes you will excuse the lateness of the hour."

"An old friend," thought Leah, and yet the name is wholly strange to me. However, he may have been an acquaintance of poor grand-papa's, and known me when I was little. Show the gentleman up," she ordered.

A few moments later, she was additionally surprised when the owner of the card calmly introduced himself.

A very charming young gentleman, no doubt—a blonde of distinguished manners, most amiable demeanor, and a perfect master of the true Parisian accent—but at the same time one she was quite convinced she had never seen before.

"Monsieur undoubtedly has the advantage of me," she said, with her sweet smile, when she had politely acknowledged his introductory words.

The stranger's mode of response was altogether unexpected, not to say somewhat alarming.

He secured the door by which he had entered, and then bent his head to listen if there might be some one moving in the adjoining room.

At the same time he handed her a card, upon which this was written in French:

"You must know me, in spite of my disguise. Find some excuse to send your maid away. It is vastly important that I should confer with you in the strictest confidence."

What could it mean?

Raising her eyes from the writing, Leah retreated a step or two, and looked at him with increased apprehension.

"Monsieur!" she began, in a faltering voice.

Then her visitor, with a peculiar smile, slightly raised and replaced his admirably-fitting blonde wig, to a momentary betrayal of the short-curling dark hair beneath.

She gave a breathless exclamation:

"Can it be possible? You, Mr. Fal—"

He placed a finger on his lips, and pointed to the writing still in her hand.

Miss Gersacht controlled a strong desire to laugh and talk on the spot, and motioned him to a seat.

Then, after a moment's thought, she was about to summon her maid, when there was a gentle tap on the communicating door, and that young person entered.

"If you please, mademoiselle," Justine began, in French, and then paused diffidently on perceiving the gentleman.

"Go on, Justine," encouraged her young mistress, amiably.

"But," with a blush and a demure lowering of the brilliant gray eyes, "I was not aware mademoiselle had a visitor."

Leah looked at the detective, and laughed charmingly.

"Monsieur Achille Flameaux, an old Paris friend, newly arrived," she condescended to explain to her maid. "Now, what is it, my dear?"

"If you please, mademoiselle," and Justine could not avoid giving the visitor a furtively critical, not to say approving, glance as she spoke, "Madame Vasquez has sent to know if she can have my assistance with her hair for an hour or so. She is not used, it seems, to getting on without a maid."

"Then why doesn't she employ a fresh one, I wonder?" said Leah, with pretended reluctance. "However, you may go if you choose, my dear. Monsieur has only just come, and we shall doubtless have plenty to talk about most agreeably until much later on."

"But mademoiselle will not be angry with me?"

"Angry? By no means! How ridiculous!"

And Justine made her exit with a parting under-lidded glance at the handsome visitor from abroad.

Leah looked to the security not only of the parlor door, but also of the one communicating with the private from the main hall, and then smilingly resumed her chair.

"How strange and romantic it all seems," she said, devouring the disguised detective with her looks, and then indulging her mirth without stint. "Do you know, Monsieur Achille—what is the other name? Oh, yes; Flameaux—almost Flambeau, but sufficiently ardent as it is!—you frightened me prodigiously at first."

"I'm not sorry for it, now that you have recovered," replied Falconbridge, smiling. "It proves the efficacy of my disguise."

"It is perfect! What a Frenchman you can be on occasion. And your Parisian accent! I wish mine were anything like as pure. Yours is even as perfect as Justine's, which is really surprising in one of her condition in life."

"Thank you, Justine is a fraud!"

"A fraud! Justine?"

"Yes; but you will understand presently."

"I hope so. Well, what have you got to tell me? Where have you been? What does it all mean?"

Without another preliminary word, the detective drew his chair a little closer to hers, and in a low, rapid, intense voice, poured into her ears, with scarcely an interruption, the thrilling story of his afternoon's adventures.

She listened with a more or less appalled look from time to time.

When he had finished she sat looking at him with staring eyes, and then she timidly touched his arms.

"Are such things credible?" she faltered. She had long been very pale, and now her lips were quivering. "I—I want to be certain that you are still alive."

"I am sorry to have disturbed you so much," said Falconbridge, regretfully. "But it was absolutely necessary that you should know, and without any delay. I don't see how it could be helped."

"Of course, it was. Don't mention it. Heavens! am I the one to be commiserated? Your indulgence for a moment, my friend."

She bent her face in her handkerchief, and little shivers went over her frame. But when she looked up again, she was once more calm, though still pale.

"I shall bear it!" she said, resolutely. "Oh, what wickedness, what murderousness encompasses us! And those awful perils you escaped. But this will do no good."

"None whatever, my dear young lady. We must simply nerve ourselves anew, and be watchful, watchful as the very stars themselves."

"I understand. Trust me for doing my best, my friend."

"You are a brave girl—one in a hundred!"

"Oh, no! only determined, with you, that my grandfather's foul assassin shall be brought to justice."

"The true spirit! But there is [more to be told,]"

"Yet more?"

"Yes; another story, which you must take in connection with that of my own adventures, to comprehend fully the extent of the plotting villainy that environs us."

And then he related the story of Tommy Dodd's experience with Madame Vasquez and Justine Chapelle.

While this was less thrilling and seemingly incredible than the one which had preceded, Miss Gersacht heard it with equal amazement, indignation and fear.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

"WHAT do you make of all this, sir?" Leah asked, after a long and troubled pause. "I confess to being no less bewildered than frightened."

"Try to consider the complication coolly," counseled the detective.

"Consider plotting traitors and devils coolly?"

"Yes, since it is only by coolness and vigilance that we can ever hope to circumvent them."

"I will try, then," with a brave effort at composure. "But tell me first what conclusions you have drawn."

"Good! I shall try to recapitulate."

"And I shall follow you earnestly."

"In the first place, this Madame Vasquez and your French maid have probably never held the relations of mistress and maid, but are bosom friends."

"Yes."

"And are in some way secretly confederated with our arch-enemy, the King of the Strangers."

"Yes," with a slight shudder.

"And, doubtless, it is in his interest that the Spanish woman has cultivated your acquaintance, and introduced Justine into your confidential service."

"Oh! but then it must be so."

"Sure! And now comes the main problem in this perilous side issue. Who and what are these women?"

"One that I fear must remain insolvable. Can you imagine?"

"No; at least, not yet. But then I am one of the hopeful sort."

"Add 'indomitable.' Oh, my friend, what would I do without you?"

"Never mind that. Now as to what we have to offset this decidedly black outlook."

"Ah! but have we any offset?"

"Assuredly. In the first place, the Thug King most probably imagines me to be dead."

"And Madame Vasquez, together with Justine, will be sedulously made to equally imagine me thus eliminated from the plotter's considerations."

"Ah! by your faithful little assistant?"

"Who is in readiness with his report—in fact, it is for Justine to also hear it that she has just been sent for—and will doubtless be yet deeper in the Spaniard's confidence."

"I understand. It is fortunate—or rather not all unfortunate. But what am I to do in the future?"

"To appear absolutely unconscious, and yet constantly, sleeplessly on your guard. In my present character, I can be with or near you much more uninterruptedly than could have been otherwise without exciting unpleasant comment. That is, if"—he hesitated—"if you can fall in with a certain idea of mine."

"Oh, I'll fall in with it. Anything to feel your protection and counsel incessantly at hand!"

"I'm not so sure of that."

"What is your idea?"

"Couldn't I be a near relative—a cousin—a dear old and privileged family friend, for instance?"

Mlle. Gersacht shook her head despondently.

"I only wish it could be," she said, slowly.

"But it would not do."

"Why, by your kind leave?"

"I have already committed myself to Madame Vasquez. I once told her that I had no near relative or privileged friend."

"Unfortunate, that! But there is yet another recourse."

"What is it?"

"You will not be offended?"

"Mr. Falconbridge, you are about the only trusted friend I have. I cannot conceive of an offense from you."

"Thank you, mademoiselle. Let me ask then, you have never disclaimed to Madame Vasquez, I hope, that you have had a—lover?"

"A lover!" with a slight blush and elevation of the prettily arched brows.

"Yes."

"No, then, my friend; I have never mentioned the subject, one way or another, I am sure."

"That is fortunate—that is, should you not take umbrage at my proposition?"

"I have already settled that."

"Well, then, Miss Leah, you are so attractive—do not think I am empty complimenting you, for it is not the case—that it would be very reasonable for both Madame Vasquez and Justine to imagine that you might have had a lover, a succession of admirers, for that matter."

"Possibly."

"That you might even have left a lover—a preferred admirer, we shall say—on the other side of the water?"

She laughed.

"Oh, yes, they might, perhaps, reasonably enough imagine it. Only it would not be true."

"Well, to facilitate our closer association in combating these plottings, give them reason for it."

"What do you mean?"

"This; that they shall think you really did leave a lover abroad—a betrothed lover, we'll say—who has now at last hastened to rejoin you in your trouble and distress."

"How?"

"And that envied individual is named Achille Flameaux—is, in plain English, myself."

At last she understood, and, instead of taking offense, she burst into an amused laugh.

Then she suddenly grew grave, the color deepening in her sweet olive face.

"I—I appreciate the cleverness of all this, my friend," she said, lowering her eyes. "But do you think it would look exactly proper?"

"Not improper, considering that I am French, you not English nor American, and that we are—betrothed, you know." He laughed reassuringly.

She put out her hand.

"I am with you in the deception," she said, frankly. "There is my hand on it."

Had the handsome detective already felt the charm of the girl's beauty and amiability and helplessness dangerously deep at heart? and was she before this susceptible, as Desdemona had been, though with a far comelier attraction than in the case of the jealous Moor, to his manliness, his hair-breadth escapes in her interest?

At all events, as he smilingly took her hand, he could not deny that it was with a sweet and nameless thrill, while the girl was still blushing,

in spite of the make-believe air she tried to assume.

"That is settled, then," said the detective.

"Yes; we must endeavor to act out our parts."

"And our new game is made up none too soon. Late as it is, I predict a visit of inquiry from the Vasquez this very night—perhaps at any moment now."

"What is our immediate course for the future?"

"Quiescence—undemonstrativeness—for a few days, or perhaps for a week or two, to throw them off their guard. I had intended to investigate that rascal, Giuseppe Malletto, with but little delay. But as I cannot do so in my true character, without betraying the fact that I am still in the land of the living, I suppose it will have to be deferred. However, I might manage it in a different disguise. But we shall see."

"I wish," said Miss Gersacht, after a reflective pause, "you would let me see the letter of that poor dying girl. What you have told me of it has strongly excited my sympathy."

Falconbridge reflected that the letter was unsigned, even by so much as the writer's initials, and accordingly produced it.

As Leah bent her eyes over the faintly-traced scrawl, he secretly watched her with the profoundest pathos and commiseration.

Not for the world would he have her learn the dreadful truth that the writer of that letter was (or had been; if now dead, as the presumption was) her half-sister, Dagmar Gersacht; while the idea of her ever knowing that the ruthless Thug King, her grandfather's murderer (Joseph Isaacstein had religiously guarded this appalling secret from her knowledge) was indescribably repellent to his thoughts.

And yet could she be kept always ignorant in this regard?

He could only hope for the best.

As Leah finished the letter, and returned it to him, he noticed a tear upon her cheek.

"It is sad, bitterly sad!" she said, simply.

"What an entanglement, and what a mournful fate for that poor young woman in the lonely house!"

Then, when he was putting the letter back in his pocket, another train of troubled thought seemed to possess her.

"Monsieur Achille," she said; adding with a slight smile: "You see, I am getting in practice already."

"And very nicely, *charmante* Leah—you see I can practice, too—only, to be true to our new relations before the world, you should omit the 'monsieur.'"

"Oh!"

"But it is really necessary."

"I submit then—Achille, *mon amant*."

"That is better," encouragingly.

"I—I have a confession to make—a withheld confidence to make amends for—though not just at present, I think."

"A confession?"

"Yes; that mystery of the—the criminal passing through my room on his bloody errand, without awakening me, you know, and—and I with the bonbon diamonds in my possession."

"Ah!" with eagerness; "you will explain that at last?"

She bent her head, listening, and then rose hastily.

"Not now," she said, hurriedly. "Some other time—perhaps when we next meet. Wait!"

CHAPTER XXV.

NEW RELATIONS.

SHE noiselessly unlocked both the inner and outer door, which she fastened as a precaution against intrusion or eavesdropping, and then, with a warning gesture, resumed her seat.

Almost instantly thereafter steps and voices—which Miss Gersacht's keen ear had detected before her companion's—were heard in the outer hall.

And then, as, in response to a knock, Leah arose to admit Madame Vasquez, demurely followed by Justine, she was chattering laughingly, in French of course, over her shoulder to Monsieur Achille Flameaux in the most natural manner conceivable.

The Spanish adventuress drew back apologetically on the threshold, while Justine, with an obeisance to her young mistress, escaped into an adjoining room.

"Ah, my dear mademoiselle, can you ever forgive me?" cried Madame Vasquez, effusively, with a sharp look first and then a slight bow for Miss Gersacht's visitor, who had politely risen, glass in eye, his blonde face just aglow with courteous expectation. "It is shamefully late, I know; but for that very reason I thought you might be alone."

"Don't mention it, but come right in!" said Leah, with assumed heartiness. "I must introduce you to monsieur, my friend. But if you do not use French I fear he will not understand."

Madame Vasquez complied, though with an effort that implied but a superficial knowledge of French, addressing something polite to Monsieur Flameaux, who had set out a chair for her before resuming his own.

"Oh, but I shall not put madame to ze in

convention!" said Monsieur Flameaux, smilingly. "Mignone Leah, *cherie*, you no do me much credit wiz your friend. I spick the Anglaise ver' vell on ze occasion."

"Dear Achille!" cried Leah, laughing; "you mean you think you do."

Madame Vasquez had stared at this unexpected exchange of endearments, or familiarities.

"Don't discommode yourself, Monsieur Flameaux, on my account," she said, smiling urbanely. "I myself am a better hand at French than English, though that is saying precious little for my lingual acquirements. But if you were only familiar with Spanish, now!" And she addressed him a few words in that tongue.

Monsieur made a little gesture of despair.

"Oh, ze Spanish. *Je suis désolé*. I understand nuzzing—a vew vords, no more."

And thereafter the conversation, as a sort of self-defense all round, was carried on in French.

"When did you arrive, allow me to ask, Monsieur Flameaux?" said Madame Vasquez, who seemed to be naturally attracted by the young man's good looks, perfectly fitting, fashionable garments, and agreeable address.

"To-day, by the Normandie, madame," was the reply.

"Since Mademoiselle Gersacht is such an old friend of yours—Justine found out that much for me, you see—I suppose you must be stopping here at the Amsterdam with us."

"No, a private friend—an old schoolmate at the Polytechnique—insisted on my going first to his house. However," smilingly, and with an ardent glance at Leah, "I shall soon change my quarters to this hotel—perhaps to-morrow. Where my adorable Leah is, there must I be."

Leah cast down her eyes and tried to appear unconscious, while Madame Vasquez looked more surprised than ever.

"Why, you two must be very old friends, indeed!" she said, adjusting her glasses.

Leah looked up with her soft little laugh.

"So," said she, "you have never even suspected my having a *fiancee*?"

"Bless me, no!" exclaimed Madame Vasquez, in genuine astonishment. "Can it be true?" and she looked inquiringly from one to the other.

Monsieur Flameaux also laughed, and with the well-bred grace of a man of the world.

Moreover, out of simple generosity to Mlle. Gersacht, he preferred to do most of the actual lying himself.

"We were to have been wedded," he said, with gentle gravity, "on the return of Mademoiselle Gersacht to Europe with"—in a low, scarcely audible voice—"with one, alas! who is no more."

"But this is very surprising!" exclaimed Madame Gersacht (the conversation was now altogether in French), shaking her beringed forefinger at Leah, as if in haste to avoid a distressing topic. "But then," resignedly, "how could I have expected such a confidence from you?"

"Oh!" said Leah, demurely; "had I not been so preoccupied with my bereavement, you might have enjoyed my fullest confidence, for that matter, dear madame."

She almost hated herself for the concluding words, but prudence seemed to demand the dissimulation, and the detective spoke his approval with his eyes.

Here Justine, who had re-entered the room unobserved, and had overheard the *pseudo* Monsieur Achille's explanation with a peculiar expression, stepped forward and looked at her young mistress askance.

Leah nodded understandingly.

The maid again disappeared, to return in two or three minutes with wine and biscuits.

She then attentively waited upon the company, her graceful figure moving about as she appeared wholly intent upon her duties, but in reality, as the detective did not fail to notice, paying the strictest heed to what was being said.

"You are likewise French, I take it?" he said at last, addressing her glass in hand.

"Oui, monsieur; une *Parisienne*." And she favored him with a sidelong flash of her magnificent eyes.

A few more exchanges were indulged in until Mlle. Gersacht, in pursuance of her *role*, thought it advisable to show signs of pretended annoyance.

"That will do now, Justine," she said, with a sudden asperity of manner. "We shall not require you as our Hebe any longer."

And then she threw a scornful look upon her pretended *fiancee*, which won for her another glance of his secret approval, though he only shrugged his shoulders very Frenchly, and affected to look mystified.

Neither was the by-play lost upon either Madame Vasquez or Justine, with both of whom it evidently "told" as the latter obediently retired.

But it was now past eleven o'clock, and, as even French lovers are supposed to have some sense of the proprieties, Monsieur Achille Flameaux rose to make his adieu.

"Madame," he said, with his most finished bow for the senora, "it is a memorable pleasure to have made your distinguished acquaintance."

Leah had so far relented as to extend her beautiful hand to him.

"To-morrow, *na belle!*" he murmured, bending over it with his lips, and looking up to her appealingly. "Do not say that it will be too soon, *adorable Leah!*"

"I will not say so, then, *mon cher!*" she replied, smilingly.

Madame Vasquez also took her departure.

It was considerably later on, however, and when Leah had lost consciousness in the embrace of Somnus, that a well-known tap came upon Madame Vasquez's room, as that personage was rather reluctantly preparing to retire.

"Ah, I felt sure you would come for a last word with me!" she whispered, as she admitted Justine.

The latter seated herself by the dressing-case, drew her wrap a little more closely about her beautiful figure, and thoughtfully lighted a cigarette.

"Well?" was the senora's interrogative, and she seated herself over her little mite of a grate-fire, with her rather savage eyes—they were savage just now—fixed upon her visitor.

"Well, yourself!" and Justine looked up and laughed. "How should I know any more of him than you do yet awhile, pray?"

"True, true!" discontentedly. "But what do you think?"

A reckless look came into the younger woman's face that was not an addition to its beauty.

"Just this," she replied: "That I half-wish Monsieur Flameaux was not a blonde."

"Ah!"

"I might then fall in love with him even more quickly than I might have done with her *brun* of a detective."

Madame Vasquez chuckled.

"And who is to trouble us no more," she supplemented, "unless dynamite and giant powder should have lost their eliminative qualities."

"And yet the detective was undeniably handsome."

"Not more so than Monsieur Flameaux, and his blondeness need not necessarily stand in your way."

"Perhaps it shall not," and Justine arose. "It would be even a better joke to cut her out of her *fiance* than out of her whilom *Vidocq*."

"Why not? Nevertheless, keep your eyes open."

"I don't often fail in doing that, my dear."

"Must you be going, *chitiquita?*"

"Yes, mamma. It is already unconscionably late. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

STREET DANGERS.

TOMMY DODD rejoined the disguised detective as the latter was quitting the hotel.

"Follow me, but no more," said Falconbridge, peremptorily. "That master-devil's spies may be even now watching us. Besides, you can explain everything when we are safe indoors at home."

"One moment, boss. The horse-car strikers are unloosed at last."

"What of that?"

"Merely as a warnin'. They've got the street-corners all around here, and some of 'em are ugly."

"Never mind. Just follow on at a convenient distance."

But the strike that was now in progress, and which had been a long time threatening, was more formidable than the detective supposed.

Though it was well on to midnight, he encountered numerous groups of sullen looking men, as he proceeded through the otherwise quiet streets in the direction of his lodgings.

Policemen, too, were numerous, but for the most part they wore an uneasy look, and it was quite evident that they were not anxious to precipitate a collision, unless crowded to the wall.

As usual in such labor disturbances, thieves, ruffians, and professional toughs were making most of the noise, while the dissatisfied workmen were less riotously, if more determinedly, disposed.

At last, in the vicinity of a monster stable and company headquarters, which Falconbridge was compelled to pass, unless he would have contented himself with an inconveniently wide *detour*, he came upon a small riot in progress.

Excited men were surging this way and that: an outgoing car, manned by the detested "scabs," was being assailed; not a few hungry-eyed women were encouraging the disorder with their frantic cries; and, while the greater part of a squad of policemen were doing their best against the mob, others were rapping or telegraphing for reinforcements.

"Look at the dudel!" suddenly yelled a man with a foreign accent, and he pointed out the detective to a knot of drunken loafers he was with. "*Corpo del Christo!* catch on to him!"

Falconbridge was dead tired out with the adventures of the day, and would have gladly passed on unconcerned.

But almost instantly he was menacingly surrounded.

And just at this instant he recognized the rascal who had attracted the mob's attention to

him, as being none other than Giuseppe Malletto.

"Why should you block my way, friends?" he demanded protestingly, in broken English. "I'm a stranger in your city, and can never have done you any harm."

Vain enough words with a class of ruffians in whose generalizations the wearing of a white shirt is a crime.

"He's one of them tyrant capitalists!" yelled Malletto, shaking his fist under the beset man's nose. "Look at his hat and boots! Catch on to that eyeglass!"

The crowd roared sympathetically, and perhaps in another moment it might have gone hard with the detective, who was already being hustled, but for certain decisive action on his part.

"Scoundrels!" he exclaimed; "you are not real strikers, or you would not thus insult an inoffensive stranger at the mere bidding of a dirty Italian bound. Way, there!"

And, suddenly discommoding himself with an athletic vigor and address they would have scarcely credited him with.

Then *biff! biff! biff!* flew his trained fists to right, to left, here, there and everywhere seeming to drop a man at every blow, and he had forced a path for himself in the direction of the Italian.

The latter wavered, as if about to funk, and then drew a knife.

But the manliness of the dude-appearing detective had suddenly won the respect of the major part of the ruffians.

"No knifing here!" cried one.

"Fair play's a jewel!" shouted another.

Then the scoundrel's knife was suddenly torn from his grasp by some one behind him.

Before he could even protest, the detective's hand was upon his throat, and then, *swish! swish! swish!* the deftly-wielded light walking-stick was administering such a castigation as the scoundrel was apt to remember to his dying day.

"*Scelerat!*" hissed the seeming Parisian, between his teeth, with a parting blow of the fist that sent the drubbed Giuseppe flying into the gutter; "I haff ze law on you! I find ze residence of you, and make you *suffaire*, zir—mark you zat—*suffaire!*"

The crowd roared with laughter, and just then a charge of the police in their direction caused a general scattering.

The detective availed himself of the opportunity to make his escape.

A little later, as he was fitting his night-key into the door of his lodging house, Tommy Dodd appeared.

"I say, boss," was the little fellow's gleeful comment, "that was a neat little birching job, and no mistake. Gaugh! but didn't you let the garlic-eater have it?"

"Come to my room in a few minutes," said Falconbridge, without heeding. "Worn out as I am, I must have your report before going to sleep."

Tommy obeyed his instructions, the detective being already in his bed when the former entered his room.

"Well, how did you manage?" And the detective settled himself in a sybaritic listening attitude, while Tommy nonchalantly appropriated an easy-chair.

"Bully!"

"You told Madame Vasquez the story you had resolved upon?"

"Yes; as the Dutch peddler-boy I had followed you up. I even described to her the manner of your escape from the elevated railroad chuck-off by the assistance of the guy-ropes and those paint-daubers, just as you told it to me. I happened to be at the rear end of the rear car, you know," with a chuckle, "and could look back as we rounded the tall curve, and see the whole thing. Then I got off at the next station, and followed you up again."

"Well?"

"I made her think I was invisibly on your heels, like your very shadow, from that time on."

"Not through the haunted house, as perhaps I may call it?"

"Oh, no, boss; not quite so green as that. You must have long since observed, my sovereign liege, that I am nothing if not plausible."

"Well, I'll take your word for it."

"Thanks! No; but I was after when you were chasing the Eyetalian; from a convenient hiding-place, I witnessed, but didn't foolishly undertake to overhear your interview with the blasters, and so on."

"The 'so on' is what I am anxious to get at, my son."

"Well, I secretly hung around the haunted house after you went into it. Then I saw the Eyetalian post himself at the gate. Then I saw an awful looking man come out, with your highness bundled under his arm like a bundle of chips."

"Ah! and how long did you give me to be in the house before all this happened?"

"Nearly half an hour, as well as I could judge."

"A little short; but then it isn't much of a discrepancy. Well, and what then?"

"To make a long story short, boss, I hid behind a rock, commanding a full view of the blast, and stood faithfully to my post till you were blown away. In fact, I could distinctly see some small flying fragments of you through the smoke and smell."

"Indeed!"

"Oh, yes; in fact I might have been knocked over by your head, or had your collar-bone graze my ear. But, as I said, I'm not much, if not religiously plausible."

"Well, you only lost me in your shadowing after seeing me blown sky-high?"

"Such was my report, boss; with the addition of all the particulars I dared throw in."

"That was the funniest part of it, boss."

"Hal did she begin to suspect your game?"

"Far from it. She seemed to corroborate it with previous knowledge of her own, and so nimbly as to fairly stagger me."

"Aha! when did she return yesterday afternoon?"

"Not till well on to dusk."

"And you saw a signal pass between her and that rascally Giuseppe as she was quitting the hotel?"

"Something mightily like it."

"That explains it. She must have communicated later on with the Thug King, who could have forestalled you with all those particulars."

"That is what I think."

"So you stand," sleepily, "pretty solid with the senora now?"

"Solidier than ever. She's as good as pie, and Justine gave me another kiss, calling me a really good little boy. I'm to continue as bell-boy for one day longer, and after that I've no doubt the old girl—"

He was interrupted by a suggestively somnolent sound.

The tired-out detective was fast asleep; so Tommy lost no time in betaking him to his own rest.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GIUSEPPI MALLETTO.

IN spite of the excessive fatigue that had sent him into the land of dreams, the Falcon Detective awoke bright and early on the following morning, and even before his faithful little assistant and co-laborer had put in a first appearance, as he was in the habit of doing.

"Seven o'clock!" ejaculated the detective, taking his watch from under his pillow to consult it. "Heigh-ho!" and with a final yawn, he threw his legs over the side of the bed.

Then his gaze was riveted upon an object in the middle of the floor.

The early morning sunshine was streaming into the room through one of two windows, whose curtain was raised and which was wide open, the room being a second floor front, overlooking the street.

What was the object, about which the shimmering light seemed to concentrate itself, and which had so riveted Falconbridge's first attention?

A bright-bladed stiletto, sticking firmly upright in the floor, whither it might have been launched by a deft cast from the sidewalk below, and with a paper tightly wrapped and wound about its hilt.

The detective rubbed his eyes and looked again.

But there it was; there could be no illusion or mistake.

Just here Tommy Dodd's familiar tap came upon the door, and the boy entered.

He also, after a greeting glance at his principal, still seated on the side of the bed, came to a dead pause with his eyes fixed upon the knife.

"I have just caught sight of it," said Falconbridge, curtly. "Bring it here."

Tommy obeyed, wrenching out the knife-point with some difficulty, observing as he did so. "It's been chucked in from outside, and the feller that did it must have understood knife-throwin', I can tell you!"

After a brief but critical examination of the weapon, Falconbridge unwound the paper.

There was writing upon it—an illiterate scrawl, to the following effect:

"So, so, my little Frenchy! if you're what you set up to be how comes it that you're in Falconbridge, the detective's room, together with that little attendant shrimp of his? This will bear looking into."

There was no signature; and no attempt has been made at a literal reproduction of the scrawl.

The detective's brow had grown both stormy and anxious while deciphering it.

Abruptly tossing the paper to Tommy, he leaped from the bed, and set about the resumption of his Flameaux character with as much haste as was consistent with a due regard for its fidelity.

Tommy slowly spelled his way through the writing, and then he began to swell with indignation, in a manner more or less suggestive of the frog in the fable.

"Shrimp!" he almost howled. "An attendant shrimp, eh? Oh, if I had the feller that wrote that insult by the neck!"

Falconbridge could scarcely forbear laughing,

though speedily preoccupied with the gravity of the incident.

"Don't bother about that," he said. "The first thing to do is to get the writer out of the way before he can do more mischief."

"Who is the writer, boss?"

"Doesn't it all but speak for itself? That cowardly hound, Giuseppe, unquestionably."

"Ha! ha."

"Yes; and he must be put out of the way before he can communicate his suspicions to the Thug King, or even to Madame Vasquez."

"Put out of the way?"

"Yes; but I shall manage that, if I can only find him before he can have had time to do so already."

"You know his roosting-place?"

"I think so—up in Harlem, the east side. He gave it to me when I first tackled him in the restaurant; and somehow I feel he was surprised into telling the truth. Besides, after my castigation of last night, he'll be apt to keep to his den a little close for awhile."

"I wish it was I that was going to look him up." And Tommy began to redden and swell again. "Shrimp, eh? Blast his garlic-eating soul, I'd cut the gizzard out of him."

"Other work for you, my boy."

"Recommend your bell-boy's attendance without another instant's delay, and be sure, if possible, that the senora doesn't quit the hotel, or communicate with any one outside of it, until you see me there, say three or four hours hence."

"All right, my liege."

"Be off with you!"

Tommy darted off.

Falconbridge only tarried long enough to swallow a cup of coffee, and then, still in his French character, as a matter of course, made a bee-line for the Harlem address which Malletto had given him.

Before quite reaching it, however, he stopped at the police station-house in whose precinct it was located.

After introducing himself to the sergeant in charge, he asked:

"Any Italian counterfeits in your precinct nowadays, sergeant?"

"I should say so, major?" was the discontented response. "Half-dollars, and pretty well executed, too. Of course it's Italians who are putting 'em in circulation—they seem to have monopolized the business of late—but we can't track the stuff to its source as yet."

"Tried Little Italy?"

This is 111th street, east of Third avenue, which, from its having several large blocks of tenement-houses occupied almost exclusively by low Italians, has within the past dozen years or so been dubbed with that characteristic name.

"Of course; no good."

Falconbridge reflected.

In hazarding a certain proposition he had in mind, he would be taking so much for granted that failure in making it good would be not a little detrimental to his reputation, but the emergency was so great that he resolved to take the risk.

"I might help you out, sergeant," he said cautiously; "though I can scarcely promise for a surety."

The sergeant looked up quickly.

Notwithstanding the natural jealousy in which Falconbridge was held, as a private detective of phenomenal success in his calling, by the regular police force of the metropolis, his shrewdness was respected by all.

"If you can, old fellow," replied the sergeant, heartily, "all I can say is that it will be remembered hereabout mightily to your advantage."

"All right."

"What have you got?"

"A clew, I think. You were wrong in giving a second thought to Little Italy. These garlic-smelling shovers of the queer seldom, if ever, harbor there, though it's a good enough outlook for a thief or a stabber of that nationality."

"Well?"

"If I turn over one of the shovers to you, it must be on a certain condition."

"Name it."

"That the fellow must be Star-Chambered forthwith—jugged out of sight, out of mind, with no possibility of his even making known his quandary to his family, friends, or a single acquaintance, for at least a fortnight."

"Oho!"

"That's the cheese, sergeant."

"Something personal?"

"No; but he can simply make me trouble in a big case I'm on."

"Good, then! Only have the proofs against him sufficiently positive, and we'll engage to manage it for you."

"I have your word to this effect?"

"You have, and I'll answer for your having the captain's, too. It is a bargain."

"Good enough! Let me have an officer?"

"Anything else?"

"Yes; a closed coach to be handy. I must have the fellow whisked out of the neighborhood, without a suspicion getting abroad as to his misfortune or destination."

"You shall have it."

Ten minutes later, Falconbridge alighted from a closed coach in East 124th street, a few paces west of the corner of Pleasant avenue, or Avenue A.

A clever policeman, with his eyes and wits about him, remained in the coach.

The neighborhood is peaceful and retired; in fact, there is none more so on the east side of Harlem.

The detective turned the corner into the avenue, and came to a pause before one of the entrances of a recently erected five-storied tenement-house of the cheaper up-town variety.

The ground floor was occupied by a grocery-store at one side of the entrance, a tobacconist's at the other.

Entering the latter, he purchased a quarter's worth of cigars, and tendered a five-dollar bill in payment.

This necessitated considerable rummaging in the money-drawer on the part of the proprietor, in order to make the change, as the detective intended it should do.

In fact, the man, a good-looking Alsatian, emptied the till, which contained mostly silver, out upon the counter.

"There you are, sir," said he at last, shoving over the change. "Thank you."

The detective replied pleasantly, and then, after gathering in his own money, pointed to a half-dollar among the coins the man was about sweeping back into the drawer.

"I am glad you did not include that in my change," said he, in French.

The tobacconist looked up, seemingly both puzzled and delighted.

"Are you a Frenchman?" he asked, in the same tongue.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FLY-TRAP.

FALCONBRIDGE had observed on entering the shop, among the ornaments hung about it, lithographs of Gambetta, Thiers, Ledru Rollin and other sturdy French patriots and statesmen, living and dead.

"Well, *mon ami*," he replied, somewhat enigmatically, "if any one should mistake me for a German, I would cut my throat!"

The Alsatian's eyes glistened, and he uttered a sort of subdued hurrah.

Altogether forgetful of the stranger's sinister introductory remark, he thrust out his hand, and seemed half-inclined to jump over the counter and forthwith embrace his German-loathing compatriot.

"Monsieur, I greet you, I love you!" he cried.

"Ah! those Germans, those tyrants, those pig-heads! True, I am only a Strasburger—no longer a Frenchman, save in heart, in soul, God help me!—but we may yet have our day, our *revanche*, eh, my friend?"

"The world moves, and France is awake!" replied Monsieur Achille Flameaux, sententiously.

"But don't forget my first words to you, monsieur. Just let me look at that half-dollar again."

"Ah, I forgot! Here it is. What! monsieur is a Frenchman, and yet an expert in American money?"

"In all coined money, to tell the truth."

Falconbridge retained the coin in his hand, after a brief examination, and then eyed the other confidentially. "You look as if you could keep a secret, my friend."

"I can!" cried the tobacconist, enthusiastically; "and, with a Frenchman, a compatriot, to the death."

"I am not what I appear."

"No?"

"I am a Parisian detective, here in New York on important business."

"Ah!"

"The detection of this piece of counterfeit money was a mere chance with me; but I suspect that the man who gave it to you is one that I want for something else."

"Aha! But are you sure it is counterfeit?"

"Sure!" He rung it upon the counter so that its false ring was apparent.

"You are right!" cried the tobacconist, waxing indignant. "Let me have it again. Ha! it must be of the batch with which they say the neighborhood hereabouts is being flooded. The scoundrel!"

"What! you remember the man who gave you this piece?"

"Distinctly."

"Describe him, monsieur."

"An Italian, a Mr. Giuseppe Malletto, on the top floor, back of this very building. A burning shame, too; for I thought him an honest fellow. Such a sad-faced wife and child, too; though now I recall rumors of his neglecting and abusing them."

"My compatriot, that is my man! On the strength of this charge I must arrest him. But it must remain a secret. None must be the wiser, apart from ourselves—not even his wife. I will see to it that she does not suffer by his absence. Will you help me?"

It chanced that the tobacconist, whose name was Morbeau, fairly delighted in a mystery.

And besides was not this the request of a Frenchman, a whilom compatriot, to say noth-

ing of his connection with the Prefecture of the Paris police?

While he was flutteringly turning it all over in his not very analytical mind, the detective handed him one of his cards, which, apart from the aristocratic name thereon, had a very distinguished look.

"Count on me, my friend!" cried Monsieur Morbeau.

"Is Malletto at home now?"

"Yes; I heard him stumbling up the flights last night, very late, as if drunk. He ought to have been here before this—long before this—for his daily package of cigarettes." He looked at his clock, which marked half-past nine.

Then it suddenly occurred to him to run out of his shop, and catch a look up at the house entrance.

He came back on his tip-toes.

"He is coming down now!" he whispered, his finger on his lips.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes; I heard him talking with the tailor on the third floor, with whom he never fails to chat a little on his way down in the morning."

"No time is to be lost, then? Can I depend on you to come to the precinct station with that," pointing to the spurious coin, "in fifteen minutes?"

"I should say so, *mon ami*! Monsieur Flameaux, a request to me from a Frenchman, a compatriot, a sworn foe of the Prussian pig-heads—"

"Yes, yes! To hell with Bismarck, my friend! Here!" And the detective replaced upon the counter the envelope of cigars he had purchased. "When the man appears, ask him to run after me with this purchase, accidentally forgotten. I shall be in waiting just around the 124th street corner."

Mr. Morbeau nodded intelligently, and the detective effected his disappearance with surprising suddenness.

The latter had hardly given the policeman in the coach the signal, and comfortably ensconced himself in an adjoining doorway, before Malletto, walking somewhat stiffly, doubtless as a tribute to his castigation of the preceding night, made his appearance from around the corner, the envelope of cigars in his hand.

He walked directly toward the coach.

"I am the person you are perhaps looking for, though without expecting to see," said the detective, abruptly confronting him.

Malletto recognized him with a sort of gasp, and would have taken to flight, had not Falconbridge relieved him of the cigars, and then grasped him by the collar.

"I want you, my man!" said the latter, calmly. "Perhaps you will find the passing of counterfeit money even a more serious offense than throwing daggers into windows, instigating riots, or even assisting at blowing up bound men with dynamite and giant powder."

Then the fellow, after a bewildered look, showed fight, and attempted to draw a weapon.

"Curse you!" he screamed, in his pigeon English, and struggling furiously; "do you take me for a fly, to be caught with sticking-paper?"

But the policeman popped out from the coach, and Malletto was quickly overpowered and manacled.

"A fly, eh?" coolly commented the detective, after hustling the captive into the coach on the heels of the officer, and clapping the door to behind them. "Well, in lieu of sticking-paper, how is this for a fly-trap? Cut ahead, driver!"

With the exception of the tobacconist, who witnessed the arrest from the avenue corner, so cleverly was the whole affair managed that it was doubtful if a single individual of the neighborhood was the wiser for it.

A few hours later, after a brief preliminary incarceration in one of the precinct cells, Malletto was subjected to a private judicial examination, which even the ubiquitous reporters failed to get any wind of, after which he was committed to a Tombs cell, to await indictment, or the arrest of some of his supposed criminal associates, which meant a sufficiently indefinite period to satisfy even Falconbridge himself.

But long before this result had been obtained, and, indeed, soon after the arrest had been effected, the latter called promptly upon Giuseppe's wife.

She was a pale, careworn young Italian woman, with a child in her arms.

He addressed her in such Italian as he could command.

"Madame," he said, after some introductory words, "I am told that your husband was not good to you."

"He gave us some little money, which kept us alive, signor," was the reply.

"He has disappeared, and will remain away indefinitely."

She did not seem to take the news very much to heart, but rather the reverse.

"I would rather starve without him than with him."

"You shall do neither. If I can depend upon your discretion, once every week on this day, Mr. Morbeau, who will have the funds for the purpose, will place ten dollars in your hands for the support of yourself and your child. This

you will receive uninterruptedly for a period of six weeks, whether your husband should return to you or not. At the end of that time your future shall still be my interest and care."

He felt perfectly certain that Miss Gersacht would stand by him, financially, in this offer.

The woman looked at him as if doubting his sanity.

"Signor, do you really mean it?" she faltered.

"I do. The first payment is in Mr. Morbeau's hands for you now."

"And what—what am I expected to do for this munificence?"

"Preserve as an inviolable secret this visit of mine, together with the fact and source and payments that shall be forthcoming?"

"Santa Maria! is that all?"

"Have I your sacred promise to this effect?"

For answer, the poor woman fell on her knees at his feet, pouring out not only the pledge demanded, but apparently her whole heart and soul in a flood of gratitude and joy.

Falconbridge, who had studied the woman carefully, somehow felt perfectly secure with regard to the secret of Malletto's arrest; and, after a parting interview with the good-hearted tobacconist below, lost no time in hurrying down-town.

CHAPTER XXIX.

JUSTINE.

It was after the noon-day hour before the Falcon Detective could reach the Hotel d'Amsterdam.

Here his first business was to engage temporary board in his character of Monsieur Achille Flameaux, and to see that a room was assigned him on the same floor, and not a great distance from Miss Gersacht's suite, he having already taken the precaution to have some of his luggage brought from his lodgings in support of his pretensions.

At his first appearance at the desk, Tommy, from his seat on the bell-boy's bench, had managed to signal to him that the senora had not quitted the hotel or communicated with any one outside.

On presenting himself at Miss Gersacht's rooms, after sending up his card, it was Justine who admitted him, an office which she did not neglect to associate with one of her most brilliant and bewitching smiles.

Leah was in her drawing-room, and to his surprise, evidently preparing to go out.

"Oh, Achille!" she exclaimed, in the maid's presence, but with a significant look, "Madame Vasquez will have it that I shall go with her on a short drive. Why did you not come earlier? I was expecting you. Now what shall I do?"

"Achille" made his excuses, and then, having understood that he must let matters take their course, sunk into a chair with a wearied air.

"What shall you do, *ma chere*?" he repeated, good-humoredly. "Why, go on your drive, as a matter of course. You'll doubtless see enough of me, if not too much," he laughed, "before a great while."

"How can you say that? But perhaps you would like to drive with us. Madame Vasquez will be happy to have you, I am quite certain."

Here Madame Vasquez, ready for the recreation, entered to answer for herself.

"Shall be delighted!" she exclaimed, in her abominable French. "Monsieur Flameaux for an escort! Could anything be more enchanting?"

"But you look tired, Achille," interposed Leah, sympathetically. "You can come, or remain here for our return, as you choose. There is the *Courrier*, though you may find it stupid enough after your Paris journals."

"With Madame Vasquez's good leave, then, I shall remain," said the detective, who had caught a fresh significance in the look and voice. "To tell the truth, I am tired, and I can go at any time, for a change, to my own room, which has just been assigned to me by your hotel people."

There was a sudden brightening in Justine's face, which was lost neither upon him nor upon Leah.

"What! you really are to be with us here?" cried the senora.

He made a few words of explanation, and then, rising, playfully kissed his hand to the young lady as she made her exit with the other.

Then he resumed his seat, with a bored look and a demonstrative sigh.

There was a soft little laugh.

The detective looked up.

Justine had been noiselessly moving about the room, feather duster in hand, and the laugh had been hers, though she was now turning away her face and reddening with seeming mortification.

"How beautiful the young woman undeniably is!" thought Falconbridge. "I suppose Leah wants me to draw her out, but there's danger just hereabouts for any man."

So he smiled, put up his eyeglass, and put on the air of a man conscious of his good looks, and by no means averse to a flirtation.

"*Ma chere fille*," he said, "did you speak, or was it only an imaginary laugh from fairy-land?"

She only smiled now, and with a rapid dissipation of her seeming confusion.

"You will not think me bold, or forgetful of my place, monsieur?"

"Your place? Where should it be but at the head of a charming *salon*, where beauty should lead the constellations of the wits?"

"Oh, monsieur!"

"The truth, my dear! But you have not told me what occasioned your pretty laugh."

"Was it pretty?"

"Very soft, sweet and musical, indeed."

"You are very gallant, monsieur. Well, then, my laugh was occasioned by a sigh."

"Damel! Do you always sigh just before you laugh?"

"How perverse! I did not say it was a sigh of mine."

"Ah! whose, then?"

"Yours."

"Mine?"

She had come to a graceful pause before him, the feather duster coquettishly flitting this way and that, her superb eyes now lowered, now sparklingly raised, a lovely little hue of excitement in her delicately-complexioned blonde face, everything about her being piquantly *chic* and attractive.

"Why, of course, monsieur."

"When did I sigh?"

"Just as you sunk back in your seat, upon mademoiselle's departure, and with such a sad look of *ennui*."

"*Diab! is that possible?*"

She nodded, with a roguish, though still discreet, or half self-constrained twinkle in her eyes.

He burst into a laugh.

"Are you sure I was guilty of those improprieties, my dear?"

"Quite sure, monsieur."

"Not very creditable in a *fiancee*, who ought to do and feel just the reverse, eh?"

"Not altogether complimentary to one's *fiancee*, monsieur."

"Oh!" he snapped his fingers impatiently, "but when one's *fiancee* is not present to be unpleasantly over-particular, you know?"

"Ah! then a certain unburdening of the feeling is permissible, I suppose?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so."

She shook her finger at him.

"And yet you are but just returning to mademoiselle after, perhaps, a prolonged separation. Fie, my friend."

Already it was no longer exclusively 'monsieur, but 'mon ami,' no less.

"Not so very prolonged," said this paragon of a Parisian lover, with the suggestion of yet another sigh. "We separated at Paris not more than a month ago."

"Not an age, to be sure! But I have understood that mademoiselle came hither direct from Amsterdam or Hamburg."

"Three weeks ago, yes. But, in her unfortunate grandfather's company, she had visited Paris the preceding week."

"How noble of monsieur that he should have remained faithful and unforgetful through such an enormous stretch of time."

He was looking at her earnestly.

"All this is mere persiflage, Justine."

She was at once penitential.

"I have been presumptuous!" she murmured, casting down her eyes. "Of course, it was very indiscreet, and—"

He interrupted her by suddenly snatching her hand, and retaining it gently in his own.

"Do you know what I wish, *ma chere*?" he abruptly asked.

"What is it that you would wish just now, monsieur?"

"Not just now, but for always."

"Well then, for always?"

"That I were dark instead of fair—a *brun*, not a blonde."

She started, perhaps with unaffected surprise, for, by a strange coincidence, the words were an echo of similar ones made to Madame Vasquez from her own lips.

"A strange wish, my friend!"

"But none the less sincere, *petite*."

"Why should you wish that?"

"You would not betray me?"

"Betray you? Oh, monsieur! But it is not men that are betrayed by women."

He pressed her hand, which she did not resent; or, at all events, she failed to withdraw it.

"Well, then, my dear girl, if I were dark, instead of fair, I would scarcely be the betrothed lover of Mademoiselle Gersacht, who is a *brunette*."

"Fie! And dare you say that?"

"I dare anything—in the imagination."

"But why do you not wish mademoiselle to be fair, as you are?"

"I could not wish that."

"But the contrast now existing would be equally rendered *nil* thereby."

"Still I wouldn't wish it in that way."

"Why?"

"Because you are fair."

"Oh, monsieur!"

"Justine, you are as pretty as an angel."

"Monsieur!"

She hastily withdrew her hand now, but that was all; for it was not wholly with anger that the color was remounting in her cheeks.

"It is true. You might have the temper of a devil," he laughed, "but you would be none the less lovely."

"Should mademoiselle but hear you!"

"But she won't."

"So you wish yourself *brun*?"

"Truly."

"That you would no longer be the betrothed of mademoiselle?"

"For that, and more than that."

"For what else?" innocently.

"Can't you guess?"

"Not I."

He repossessed himself of her hand.

"That I might try my luck with you, who are the perfection of a blonde."

"I must run away. You will flatter me to death."

"It is no flattery, as you must well know."

"*Parbleu!* how should I know?"

"Because you must have a truth-teller that no woman is ever without."

"What is that?"

"Your mirror, my dear."

"Oh, but a truce to this, now!"

"With all my heart, if something more substantial may replace it!"

"This must not be!" She again withdrew her hand, and somewhat peremptorily, though with a pleased laugh. "However, there would be yet another way out of your quandary."

"How is that?"

"That is, if your wishing might come true."

"But in what other way?"

"By wishing me a *brune*."

"I wouldn't have it."

"But you would still be afforded the contrast that you seem to crave."

"No matter; it would never do."

"Why?"

"I would have you just as you are—not the faintest suggestion of a change."

"But why?"

He drew a long breath, seeming to master, or only half-master, a powerful emotion with great difficulty.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he muttered under his breath.

"Ah, my friend, you alarm me!"

"Alarm you, Justine?"

"Yes."

"Come here. Come, I tell you!" his passion seemed overmastering him. "Would you drive me crazy? By heaven! you shall come here, or—"

But here she escaped him, and, running into the adjoining room, locked the door behind her.

"Monsieur!" she called out from within.

"What is it?" he replied.

"My duties in the back rooms will require my attention till mademoiselle's return. But have no fear as to my discretion, *mon ami*."

"We may know each other better some day, my dear. *Au revoir!*"

"Not bad for a beginning!" he thought, as he picked up the newspaper. "Perhaps she will find out that two can play at her game of treachery and deceit in the Vasquez (*i.e.* Thug King's) interest. But it is a good-deal like playing with edge-tools."

Miss Gersacht returned from her drive in less than an hour.

"Don't attempt any conversation of importance," she managed to say in a low tone, soon after they were alone together. "We are watched constantly. Couldn't you take me out this evening to some place where we can converse freely?"

"Leave it to me," said the detective. "I shall arrange it."

CHAPTER XXX.

LEAH'S SECRET.

DIRECTLY after dinner that evening, the detective found Miss Gersacht in her parlor, the inevitable Madame Vasquez being with her.

"My dear Leah," said he, "I want you to go with me to an entertainment. Get ready at once."

She looked up in pretended surprise.

"But my dear Achille! you know I cannot go to an entertainment—not yet."

"This is a private affair. It is strictly *en regle* and will do you good. You mustn't mope here in your rooms forever. It is unnatural. Pray get ready, my love."

She seemed to relish his commanding mood, and at once obeyed, after excusing herself to Madame Vasquez.

The latter was bold enough to throw out several hints—sedulously disregarded—as to her willingness to go along, and as Leah reappeared twenty minutes later, Justine shot a questioning glance at the young man from over her mistress's shoulder, but 'Achille' paid no attention whatever, and presently bore off his prize in triumph.

On the way to the street, he whispered to Tommy Dodd, who had a knack of always being on hand when expressly wanted:

"Be with them, and listen to their talk. The disappearance of Giuseppe should have reached madame's ears by this time."

Then he hurried Leah into a coach in waiting,

in whose driver he had the most implicit confidence, and they were off.

Leah drew a long breath, and looked at her companion gratefully.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the Casino."

"What sort of place is that?"

"Good music, and where we can be perfectly alone and confidential in a great crowd."

"Well, I am content. Anything to be rid of spies and eavesdroppers."

During the drive, he recounted the incidents of the preceding night and morning.

She listened with interest, and not only claimed to stand the expense of supporting Giuseppe's wife and child, as he had arranged, but was earnest in her womanly sympathy.

He then recounted his interview with Justine, though with certain reservations, which for some reason or other caused him no little dissatisfaction with himself.

"It is as I anticipated," said Leah, thoughtfully. "You must let her go on without a rebuff. It is only a part, I feel confident, of the general spy and pry system that Madame Vasquez and she imagine they are instituting over me and my affairs."

Falconbridge experienced fresh secret discontent, though from a different cause. Could she not have manifested just a little real jealousy of the dangerous game he was permitting himself to be led into by the artful lady's-maid?

But they were both wholly "out," as the sequel will prove, with regard to the character and the passions of that young person, who was much more of an enigma than they, or even Madame Vasquez, had any idea of.

Arriving at the Casino, a private-box was secured, where they could both see and hear to advantage, and at the same time converse with the most perfect freedom.

The play-house was fashionably crowded, and an amusing burletta, with capital performers, was in progress.

But Leah, though ordinarily passionately fond of music, was preoccupied and distraite from the first.

In a few moments, she partly drew the curtain before the box-opening, and drawing her chair back behind it so that her face was shaded from her companion's gaze, she looked at him with a mingling of trouble and determination in her gray eyes, that he had seldom, if ever, remarked in them before.

"I may not soon have the chance again, my friend," she said, abruptly. "I must tell you to-night."

He looked at her with earnest encouragement.

"You allude," he said, in a voice as low as the one she had adopted, "to the secret you have been keeping from me?"

"Yes; and you know," appealingly, "that you did not object."

"To your retaining this one secret apart from our confidences?"

She nodded, with compressed lips.

"But why should I have objected? by what right?"

She interrupted him with an impatient, almost an angry, gesture.

"You had the right!" she exclaimed. "I gave it to you when I struck hands with you, thus accepting your confidence, your protection, your—your brotherliness!" The color flushed earnestly into the pale olive of her face. "It isn't fair in you to pretend that, and to be so—so submissive and good-hearted. I don't deserve it!"

It was an unexpected outburst, fortunately associated just then by a crashing orchestral of one of the chief choruses of the opera under way.

The detective contented himself with bowing somewhat deprecatingly, while observing her closely.

A species of exasperation seemed to have seized upon the young girl.

"You are not fair now—not fair to yourself!" she continued, passionately. "I deserve nothing but your reprobation and contempt, in having kept this thing so long from you. And yet you give me nothing but kindness, confidence, self-devotion in return."

Falconbridge's conscience smote him a little as he remembered those reservations of his with regard to the Justine episode of the afternoon, but he remained very calm.

"Let me entreat you to compose yourself," he urged, quietly. "There; you are succeeding already. Bravo! Nothing like effort!"

She was making the effort bravely, and was gradually herself again.

"Now for your secret!" said the detective, firmly. "Tell me what it is."

She looked him squarely in the face.

"The man," she said, "who entered our suite by my room-window that night could not have been my grandfather's murderer."

"Why not?" demanded Falconbridge, though more than suspecting what was coming.

"Because I—I saw and recognized him."

"You saw and recognized him?"

"Yes."

"Who was he?"

"My—my father!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

EMBARRASSMENT.

THOUGH Leah's answer had been thoroughly anticipated by her companion, it filled him with no less commiseration than embarrassment.

How was he ever to let her know what the charity of Joseph Isaacstein had so industriously concealed from her—that Max Gersacht, her father, and George Brookton, the Thug King, her beloved kinsman's ruthless and mercenary murderer, were one and the same?

How it would strike at her pure young heart! Or should he ever make it known to her? "Not now, at least," he said to himself. "Fate or circumstances may one day unfold the terrible truth to her, but not I, not I!"

He therefore simulated a surprise he was far from feeling.

"Your grandfather, as you may have guessed, Miss Gersacht," he said, quite slowly, in order to have her recover from her agitation, "told me a good deal about your father."

"Yes."

"I should judge that he was a bad man—a very bad man."

"He was that. Small as I was at the time he deserted us, I have a recollection of how he would make my mother cry, and how my step-sister Dagmar was wont to be rude to her, with his approval, besides maltreating and tyrannizing over me."

"But you were very young, were you not—more than three or four years?"

"That was all."

"Then you can scarcely recollect these things very distinctly?"

"No; not distinctly. But still I have a recollection."

"But would you know your step-sister Dagmar again, should you see her?"

"I ought to; she was certainly hateful enough to impress my memory; a great, gaunt, overgrown blonde, with freckled cheek-bones, staring red hair, and such a malicious, mean expression."

"Still, she was also but a child, and that is so many years ago."

"True. Well, I suppose you must be right. She may have improved or grown more hateful-looking. It is doubtful if I should recognize her now."

"And your father?"

"Oh, perhaps I wouldn't have recognized him, but for his photograph."

"His photograph?"

"Ah, that is one of my lesser secrets, my friend. Yes; I have his photograph."

"This surprises me. I should have thought your grandfather would have mentioned it to me."

"Poor grandpapa! he did not know. It was also a secret from him—the only confidence I ever kept from him, thank Heaven! And that was through a promise exacted from me by my mother shortly before her death."

"Oho!"

"Yes; she confided my father's picture to my childish hands, enjoining me to never show it to grandpapa, whose hatred to my bad papa she well knew. Child as I was, I managed to preserve it, unsuspected by even grandpapa, and occasionally looking at it in secret. That is how I came to know him on that terrible night, I suppose."

A devouring curiosity was upon the detective to examine this portrait of the Thug King in the latter's long kept-up character of Max Gersacht; during which he had had two wives, and a child by each, and the successful acting out of which had probably formed the most extraordinary feature of his scarcely-paralleled career.

"How I wish I might see that photograph!" he said, half to himself.

To his great satisfaction, Leah produced a thin enveloped-package, saying:

"There is no reason why you should not, my dear friend. Indeed, I have brought it with me for no purpose than your seeing it. Here it is."

The detective took the photograph out of its envelope, and greedily inspected it.

At first his disappointment was simply immense.

Could this pictured face and that of the Paris Rogue's Gallery—George Brookton's undisguised own, which he had unmasked on the steamship pier, and which had confronted him so hideously only the day before under such appalling conditions—be one and the same?

The pictured face before him was positively handsome, though marred by a discontented and surly expression, and—by a certain something which he could not understand, and yet felt to be there.

But no; as his examination dived into the lineaments more critically, more microscopically, that mysterious something seemed to grow upon him, and then to come out more fully and evolve with greater clearness, until it gradually disassociated itself from its environments and became the dominating trait, the inner ego of the entire physiognomy.

He started. It became suddenly manifest that he was, in translating the hidden meaning of that subtle trait, looking at the original's in-

terior nature amid a network of counterfeiting make-ups, dissimulations and disguises.

Yes; there was no doubt of it. The Thug King himself was the devilish *deus ex machina* of that pictured face, and he and Max Gersacht were indubitably the same being; though the detective could scarcely withhold his admiration from a facial transformation so exceptional and complete.

He returned the photograph to his companion with a few words of thanks.

"You had made up your mind to tell me particulars, I suppose?"

"Everything, as a matter of course," she replied, as she carefully replaced the picture in her bosom. "It has grieved me to have kept the secret so long from you as I have."

"Better late than never," said the detective.

"I suppose so. But, of course, you must understand the necessity, nay the duty, that prevented me from volunteering this information at the coroner's investigation."

"I beg pardon—ur—not exactly."

"Why, don't you see that, had I been less secretive, they would at once have confounded my father with the actual criminal"—she shuddered—"with the terrible Thug King himself?"

"Oh, yes!—naturally."

"Besides," eagerly, "if you will recall my testimony, together with the lucky indulgence with which I was treated, you will remember that I said nothing in answer to the examining questions, that was not strictly true in the literal sense. Though, to be sure, I might have said more of my own accord; which was the lookout of the coroner and his jury, you know, and not mine."

It was pitiable, these eager excusatory words, combined with her naive ignorance of the awful truth.

The detective gravely nodded.

"For, you will remember," she went on, "that, in answer to the only question put to me on the point, I testified to not being awake when the window of my room was forced in from without?"

"Yes."

"That was perfectly true. But, if I had been pushed to the wall by the examiner—as, luckily for me, I was not—I should have had to say that my father subsequently awakened me before quitting my room."

"Ha! And you still had the presence of mind not to betray yourself, and to recognize him as he passed the bed?"

"Not at all; I exchanged words with him."

"Is it possible?" And Falconbridge looked at her with unfeigned astonishment.

"Yes."

"What was it that awakened you?—perhaps the intruder's stealthy footfall in passing?"

"No; his hand under my pillow."

"What!"

"Yes; and when I started up and recognized him in the moonlight—that is, after the first shock, and when he had succeeded in somewhat allaying my alarm—he told me everything."

"Told you everything?"

"Yes; the occasion of his being there, the perilous manner of his intrusion—everything. Oh, Mr. Falconbridge, I know he must have been a bad man—a very bad man; but, for all that, it was really pitiable."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed! Now what do you imagine had prompted him to that hazardous and stealthy entrance into my chamber?"

"Well—ur—perhaps you can tell me better than I can imagine it."

"Indeed, yes; for no one could imagine the truth of such a man."

"What, then, had been his prompting motive?"

"His hope of securing a picture, or some other token, of my poor dead mother; of the wife whom he had so cruelly abused, you know."

At first, her companion could only stare his intense amazement.

"You don't tell me so!" he managed to stammer at last.

"Yes. You see, sickness and remorse had come upon him at last. Too-late repentance was gnawing at his heart. If he could only have my mother's picture, or some simple thing she had worn, or treasured, it might ease his terrible sense of remorse. And yet he dared not approach my grandfather, nor me openly, with such a request."

At this juncture there was a fresh orchestral outburst, which tended in a measure to relieve the detective of the fresh embarrassment which this young woman's unparalleled credulity and self-deception were causing him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AT THE CASINO.

INDEED, Falconbridge was only gradually able to realize the extent of his young companion's unsophistication as exemplified by these extraordinary disclosures she was making to him.

"But really, my friend," he interposed, as soon as he could make himself heard, "don't you think that feat of your father's, in climbing his way to your room-window by means of the lightning-rod, and afterward cutting

through the sash, with little or nothing to support his weight over the area-abyss, was an extraordinary one for a sick man?"

"He had recovered from his sickness," exclaimed Leah. "And, moreover, he was always such a wonderful strong man, especially with his hands."

"Ah!"

"Why, he would often amuse Dagmar and me—I seem to remember it quite distinctly—by placing two considerable pebbles in one of his hands, and then crushing and breaking them against one another like egg-shells."

"Well, as to your disclosure, Miss Gersacht. Did your father recognize you at once, in the grown woman you had become?"

"Yes; but perhaps he would not have done so had he not noted me with grandpapa numerous times before. He came over on the same steamer with us, without ever disclosing himself. Think of that!"

"Humph! One would suppose, then, he might have found an easier previous mode of communicating with you than the decidedly perilous, not to say unique, one he selected."

Miss Gersacht looked at him a little constrainedly before replying, quietly:

"My grandfather kept me pretty close, you know."

"Ah! naturally enough. But your father, from what I have learned, was scarcely the man to be mortally afraid of his father-in-law."

Leah winced a little, but still she bore up stoutly.

"Do you forget learning," she said, quietly, "that my father was a—a—that he had robbed grandpapa? All men fear the law, don't they, when they chance to have transgressed it. There! you have compelled me to say it."

"Do forgive me, my friend!" exclaimed Falconbridge, contritely. "But you must credit me with only trying to get at the bottom of what you have decided to tell me."

"Yes, yes!" and she held out her hand, while the neighboring audience roared its applause over a duet which had just been triumphantly rendered.

Indeed, the whole situation seemed strange and unreal, these two thus exchanging these terrible confidences, and yet separated by but thin partitions and a half-drawn stall-curtain from all that scene of joyous entertainment and pleasure.

Leah looked around her vaguely, appearing to feel the odd grotesquerie of it all for the first time.

She glanced from her companion to the little sea of heads and well-dressed figures in the parquette and orchestra chairs below, and then from the spectators to the stage, just at this juncture presenting a superb ballet performance, of exceptionally brilliant voluptuous features.

She could scarcely have felt it all, more unreal or out of place, she thought, than if she had suddenly found herself on the stage, behind the row of dazzling footlights yonder, transformed into one of those prettily limbed, all but shirtless dancers who were whirling this way and that in a sort of harmonious cyclone of Terpsichorean frenzy, to the accompaniment of the mad witch music from the orchestra.

She leaned her head on her hand, and then, upon raising it, was more collected than before.

"I will go on, my friend," she said, gently. "But help me out; question me, in your way, you know."

The detective at once proceeded to do so, for the embarrassment of the situation, together with his sympathetic pity for the girl's all but incredible gullibility, was becoming intolerable.

"Your father had no difficulty, then, in recognizing you, you say," he began. "But how was it on your part?"

"You mean, if I recognized him?"

"That is it."

"Not at once—not until after he had explained a little," she answered, slowly. "But then I think I would have come to recognize him anyway."

"He was not greatly changed, then?"

"Oh, but he was! Changed? oh, never so greatly!" And she gave a little shiver, turning pale.

"How would you have been able to recognize him, then, do you think?"

"I can't describe it. A dim sort of a familiarity, that was less like a recollection than as if I had once met and known him in a previous existence; though when he was very, very different."

Falconbridge recalled his own strange recognition, that had grown out of his slow analysis of the photograph.

"You were not," he continued, "assisted in your recognition by your memory of the portrait you have shown me? I mean; you would not have been so aided in your recognition, had he failed to help you out?"

"Oh, no! not at all. He is no longer like his picture—that picture. Quite the reverse." Again that little shiver, with the paling of the soft face. "And yet—there was a something the same; I can't describe it."

"Well, we won't say anything more on that

point. So it was his hand under your pillow that awakened you?"

"Yes."

"Mightn't he have touched, or whispered to you, instead? Didn't it strike you that his way of awakening you was a very suspicious way?"

"No; but that it was a very eccentric way. Mr. Falconbridge, I know that my father was a bad man—a wicked man; I do not attempt to defend him. But his ways in everything were so different from every other man's ways!"

The detective's impatience was getting the better of him more than he was aware, and he suddenly surprised himself, scarcely less than her, by blurring out:

"Then it never occurred to you, poor child! that he might have been feeling under your pillow for the bonbon diamonds that you wore about your neck?"

He could have bitten off his tongue, but it was too late.

Leah had drawn herself up rigidly, whitening and flushing painfully.

"I have been making a great mistake with you, Mr. Falconbridge," she said, icily and yet regretfully. "You are no more discriminating than that ignorant coroner would have been. You actually seem to infer that my unfortunate father could have been identical with poor grandpapa's murderer!"

Falconbridge managed to make his peace with her at last, but only after the exercise of much *finesse*.

"The poor man, then," he finally said, "must have been really grieved, I suppose, to find out from you that the memento he was seeking so earnestly was not to be had?"

"Yes," replied Leah; "hardened as he seemed to have become, he seemed to be rendered all but desperate."

"Well, the *finale* of it all?"

"He seemed to be in deadly fear of poor grandpapa and of justice overtaking him. After making me promise that I would keep his strange visit a secret, and say he would try to make his way out through the rooms, he placed his hand caressingly on my head, and stole away. Perhaps the murder had already been done, and the sight of poor grandpapa's dead body, while he was slipping through his apartment, caused him to hurry away in a panic. Or maybe it had not yet been committed. Who shall say? I somehow fell asleep again, and—you know the rest."

"Did your father," asked Falconbridge, after a pause, "say anything to you with regard to your step-sister, Dagmar?"

"No; perhaps for the reason that I didn't ask about her. But the time was very brief, only a few whispered minutes, that he was with me."

She drew back the box-curtain, and looked out wearily on the brilliant surrounding scene.

The detective followed her example, not sorry that the strange interview was at an end.

The final act of the burletta was under way, and the tenor and soprano were convulsing the audience with an exceptionally sprightly and comic air.

Suddenly the detective gave an involuntary start.

He touched his companion's arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "The powerful figure and set, strong face on the further side, second orchestra seat from the central aisle, fourth row back. Do you mark the man?"

"Yes, yes!" after a hesitant pause, and with a long, quivering breath.

"Who is it?"

"Heavens! my father."

It was the Thug King.

Presently he turned his head slowly, and looked toward them.

Then, with a barely perceptible inclination of the stony face in Leah's direction, he arose, hat in hand, and heedless of the interruption he was causing, glided out of the theater.

The detective suddenly determined to destroy his companion's preposterous misconception on the spot, cost what it might.

"You are certain you recognized in that man your father?" he asked, earnestly.

"Certain? Absolutely."

"I also," he said, with much impressiveness, while looking her full in the eyes, "recognized him, and with absolute certainty, as—some one else."

"You recognized him?"

"Yes."

"As whom?"

"You will believe what I am about to tell you, as the absolute truth?"

"Why, of course, my friend," impatiently.

"What other person could you recognize in my father?"

"George Brookton, alias Max Gersacht, le *Monarque des Etrangleurs*, and Joseph Isaacstein's murderer!"

Without a word, Leah looked at him with appalled, horrified eyes, and then fainted.

CHAPTER XXXIII. BREATHING SPACE.

WHEN Falconbridge got Leah back to the hotel—fortunately her faint had lasted but a few minutes—Madame Vasquez, who was also

alighting from a carriage at the private entrance at the same time, took charge of her at once.

She had also taken it into her head, she said, to visit a Cuban friend, whom she had found unexpectedly to be very ill.

The detective declined to go further than the entrance of Miss Gersacht's rooms, where Justine was on hand awaiting her young mistress's return, and, promising to drop in on the following day, made his escape.

Tommy Dodd was duly expectant of him in one of the lower corridors, and a weather eye for spies and eavesdroppers.

"Sol!" said the detective; "the senora has been out."

"Yes, boss. I carried up wine to her room, where she chattered in Spanish with the French maid for a while, and then determined to call on some lady friend from Havana."

"And you did not shadow her movements?"

"I just couldn't, boss, without a risk of giving myself away; and that's a cold fact."

"What was the hindrance?"

"The French gal knocked me out."

"Speak sense."

"Well, she kept me talking to her at the door of Miss Gersacht's suite—chatting and chaffing, you know—until it was too late to catch on to the old gal's trail."

"It may not have been important. Were you present when the women were conversing together?"

"Yes, my liege."

"Anything new?"

"Only one thing worth mentioning."

"What is that?"

"Well, they must have some sort of mesmeric-telegraphic communication with the Thug King, boss."

"Like enough. Something about Giuseppi, eh?"

"That's it. They used the garlic-eater's name several times in their rapid jabber, which, as you know, I can only understand perfectly when spoken slowly or lazily, after the manner of the Greasers."

"Still, you must have gathered something?"

"Just this much, boss: That Madame Vasquez knows in some way of the disappearance of the Italian, and is angrily troubled and mystified thereby; while Justine, instead of being especially concerned, seemed to rejoice over any misfortune that may have chanced to the fellow, whom for some reason or other, she hates like poison."

"That is odd."

"True enough; but I can't make it out."

"Well, we shall have to be very quiet and undemonstrative for a number of successive days at least, if we are to avoid arousing these women's suspicions, and to ultimately discover the secret of their connection with the Thug King."

"True for you, boss."

"The senora's confidence in you seems unabated?"

"Better'n that; regularly on the jump."

"You know my room here in the hotel?"

"Thirty-seven?"

"Yes. You are to be very careful with regard to approaching me there."

"The woman won't catch me napping, boss."

"You have also arranged with the clerks for sleeping here in the hotel, as I ordered?"

"Yes, boss," a little ruefully. "I've a manorial roost in the servants' heaven and bell-boys' paradise—up in the peak of the roof, among the rats and bedbugs."

"Good-night!"

After this a whole fortnight passed away very quietly, without any fresh notable adventures on the part of either the Falcon Detective or his little assistant.

But, in the mean time, nothing was neglected, and the minor features of the plottings that were in progress did not lack of improvement and cultivation.

It seemed evident that Falconbridge was still thought to be dead by the Thug King and his spies, if Madame Vasquez and Justine could be so called.

Achille Flameaux and his pretended betrothed were much together, though not too much, the formality of their fictitious relations being generally accepted throughout the hotel.

The former's side flirtation with Justine continued to grow apace, with Leah's fullest, or at least ample, knowledge, but with as yet no discovery of Justine's mystery, which was, of course, the disguised detective's set object from first to last in his reluctant and distasteful surrender to the girl's secret advances.

With the apparent eliminations of the hated detective from the scene, Madame Vasquez had no longer such need of Tommy Dodd's shadowing services as at the start, though he was still liberally feed, and supposed to be her secret spy upon "Monsieur Achille," to whom, in a rather mild form, she seemed to have transferred some of the malice and suspicion that she had so lavished upon the supposedly defunct detective.

As for the Thug King himself, there had been vouchsafed not a sign of him since that memorable night at the Casino.

Cautious inquiry, on the part of the disguised detective, had evoked the fact that the lone house at Fort Washington was held in the name of a certain Mr. Barker, whose legal agents had always seen to the paying of the taxes, but with regard to whose personality nothing definite could be discovered, though there was no doubt in the detective's mind as to Barker being but another of Brookton's aliases.

It was upon a certain lovely April morning at about the end of this period that "Monsieur Achille" presented himself in Miss Gersacht's little drawing-room.

She looked up at him with her customary smile, which, however, had grown very sad, while there was a pathetic quietude and controlled dejection in the young lady's entire appearance and manner, which had caused her pseudo-betrothed many a secret pang of late.

"If the truth must be told, the girl's organization, physical and mental, was slowly but surely giving way under the strain and pressure of her uniquely distressing environments.

"Come and sit by me, *mon ami*," said Leah, without rising from the sofa, in which she was half-reclining, with a novel in her listless hand. "There is something I must say to you."

He smilingly advanced, but paused midway with the inquiring look that was patent to both.

"The coast is clear," she said. "I have sent Justine away on a long errand, and madame went out for a drive half an hour ago, not a little miffed at my refusal to go with her. We can have one of our rare *tete-a-tetes* without fear of interruption, thank heaven!"

"I have brought you some bonbons," he said, laying an expensive box of confections in her lap, as he seated himself at her side. "It struck me that I hadn't seen you munching any for a long time."

She gently put the package away from her on a table near at hand.

"I seem to have lost my taste for sweets," she said, in a voice which she strove not to render irritable.

"What! even for bonbons?"

"Yes; and for pretty much everything else, I fear."

He laughed, hoping to dissipate her dejection.

"What if these, too, contained diamonds?"

"My friend," earnestly, "it would make no difference—save to render them yet more distasteful, whether you can credit it of me, or not."

He looked at her keenly.

"Leah, it is proving too much for you," he said. "And no wonder, poor child!"

"That is just it," she cried, desperately. "I can't stand it any longer! I am going away!"

"Away!" echoed the detective, in a sort of consternation.

"Yes, yes!" wildly. "It is killing me. "The espionage of these women, my enforced dissimulation with them, knowing their villainy, their unscrupulousness, their mysteriousness, was trying enough, to say nothing of the recent evanishment of the master-villain, who seems to have permanently baffled you at last. But now, ever since the knowledge that that man and—and my own father—" She broke down, choking with dry, tearless sobs pitiable to witness.

He took both her trembling hands in his, patting them soothingly, and murmuring low words of encouragement and hope.

"Oh, it is no use, my friend, my only friend!" she sobbed. "Nothing will come of it. You mean well, you are the soul of goodness to me. But that monster is impregnable, invincible, if he has not already quitted the country."

"That he has not done," interposed her companion, in a low voice. "I feel it in my bones; I would almost swear to it!"

"Useless! useless!" she tossed up her arms. "Even if still on these shores, he is beyond retribution, beyond justice. My grandfather's murder will never be avenged. Oh! why did we ever come to this fatal country? I must go away—away!"

"Where would you go?"

"How should I know? Back to Amsterdam, I suppose, hopelessly. "We had warm friends, if not relatives, there, chiefly among the diamond-cutters and the Jewish families generally."

"Humph!"

"At all events, I would have enough money with me to insure me a refuge, some sort of a home among them. And I feel that, if I should thus manifest a relinquishment of all intention to bring this terrible Thug King to justice, these spies would leave me alone, and I should have something like peace and rest."

"Almost, but not quite."

She had forced herself into a comparative composure, though maintaining her new determination, it would seem.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"That your flight would not relieve you of your wearing environments, save on one condition."

"What is that one condition?"

"That you should leave the bonbon diamonds to peacefully fall into the possession of the Thug King, or these agents of his in woman's garb."

"Oh! can you mean it?"

"I am morally sure of it. That monster's ra-

pacidity is as insatiable as the maw of a cataract's abyss, as the hunger of devils for lost souls! He might leave your remaining paltry hundreds of cash in peace. But he will never give you rest while one of those diamonds remains in your possession."

"But they are still in the hotel safe below, without any attempt having been made upon them as yet."

"You mistake."

"What! are they not there?"

"Doubtlessly. I referred to your saying that no attempt had been made upon them."

Leah was growing excited again, though making a brave effort to keep calm.

"Please explain, my good friend."

"I am here this morning expressly to do so."

"How?"

"The proprietor has requested me to say to you that the diamonds must be transferred to some bank or safe deposit company—out of his hands, at all events, and forthwith."

"He declines to be longer responsible for the gems, then?"

"After to-day."

"Why is this?"

Before the detective could reply, there was a step in the passage, and Justine appeared somewhat unexpectedly.

"You have returned with exceptional promptness," said Miss Gersacht, with unusual peremptoriness.

"Oui, mademoiselle," was the demure reply. "I was fortunate in making the horse-car connections, and the *modiste* for a wonder, did not keep me waiting."

Leah dismissed her, and the conversation was thereafter carried on with the utmost guardedness.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE UNEXPECTED ALWAYS HAPPENS.

"A FELONIOUS attempt was made to obtain your jewel box of the night-clerk last night," the detective explained. "One of the bell-boys (not Tommy Dodd) presented a forged note with your signature, requesting that the box be sent up to your room, where you were waiting to receive them. Suspecting something wrong, the clerk signaled for Dick Pryor, the hotel detective. Before the latter could reach the office, the boy had taken the alarm, and disappeared. It is doubtful if he will ever show up again. This was at ten o'clock, when you were still absent at that concert with me."

Leah looked at him as if petrified.

"Well?" she breathlessly asked.

"Dick Pryor is no fool, and with certain private opinions of his own as to certain persons not of the masculine gender."

"Yes, yes!"

"He quietly slipped up here, and entered these rooms with his master key, expecting to find either Madame Vasquez or Justine waiting to receive the jewel-box in your name. These rooms were empty, and he subsequently located both women in the senora's apartment. There were, however, traces of their having been here shortly before the detective's visit. They had somehow got wind of the miscarriage of their plot, and effected their disappearance just in time to avoid an exposure, or a direct charge of felonious intent. That is all."

Leah had listened with intense interest at first, and then with a dull, hopeless air.

"Which of the house-boys was it?" she listlessly asked.

"A new hand, calling himself Brierly. Evidently a secret agent of the Thug King's and consequently not liable to show up again. Of course, it wouldn't have done for madame to have had a direct hand in the affair, nor to have employed Tommy in it, much as she has come to trust him."

Leah suddenly wrung her hands, with a pitifully despairing expression.

"Let them take everything—diamonds, cash, all!" she moaned. "Anything for peace, for rest! I can't stand it. I am going away!"

"No; you must not."

"My friend, I shall, indeed; I am determined."

"Give me one week longer."

"Months, if you choose, so that I do not remain in this country."

"But your remaining here is indispensable, my child."

"I shall go all the same."

"I have been doing more than you imagine in the past days of seeming inaction. My plans are slowly, but surely perfecting."

She shook her head determinedly.

"In one week's time, or less," he continued, entreatingly, "I pledge myself to have the Thug King, your grandfather's murderer, in prison—if only you will not desert me."

His earnestness seemed to excite her sympathy, but she shook her head again, the lines of her lovely face having assumed a set, resolute look he had never seen in them before.

"My friend, I shall not remain. Three days' more of this strain would kill or craze me."

"Not, perhaps," he was regarding her with a peculiar look, "if you had a support, perhaps not thought of—by you as yet—if you would deign to accept it."

"What support do you allude to?"

"I cannot tell you—not at this moment."

"It would matter nothing. My determination is unalterable."

"Will nothing move you?"

"No; I think not."

"At all events, I shall attempt a plea, never attempted by me before."

"What is it?"

He rose, pacing the floor in unwonted excitement.

"Send Justine away on another commission," he finally said, abruptly resuming his seat at her side. "We must be absolutely secure against interruption or intrusion, before I can present this last argument of mine to your consideration."

Something in his manner mystified her, which was in itself a change from the cheerless despondence of her thoughts.

She summoned Justine, and dispatched her forthwith with a message to her milliner, many blocks distant.

The maid accepted her instructions meekly, but with an underlidded flash of jealous hatred for her young mistress which it was well for her that neither Leah nor her pseudo-lover detected.

Falconbridge watched from one of the windows till he had seen Justine take a horse-car, the center of many an idle masculine eye by reason of her superb figure and bold blonde beauty.

Then, after looking out into the private hall, to make still surer that Madame Vasquez had not returned to resume her espionage, he turned to Leah, who had resealed herself, and was regarding him with no little wonder.

"It must be very important, my friend," she observed, with a sad little smile, "this final plea that you are to make in the hope of inducing me to yield my determination."

She would have added, "and which I must regretfully assure you will be perfectly useless," or something to a similar effect; but that an odd alteration in the detective's look and manner now for the first time forcibly impressed her.

It was a strange mingling of embarrassment and hesitation, all the more noteworthy in its association with his wonted taciturnity and undemonstrativeness.

"It is important, Leah," he responded, with an evident effort. "In fact, my very life is in this final plea that you shall remain with me in this fell and deadly business to the bitter end."

"Your very life?"

"Yes; and perhaps more than that. If you can but find it in your heart to accept of it, you need fear no more distress, or espionage, or cruel, persecuting villainy, for you will have such a support, such a bulwark against these miseries, that henceforth you will face them without a fear."

"I really do not understand you, my friend," Leah faltered, and yet with a vague suspicion of what might be the truth.

He fell upon his knees at her feet, and, seizing her hands, covered them with his kisses in indescribable excitement, while the blonde make-up of his artificial complexion was red and pale by turns.

"Leah, I love you!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER.

LEAH had tried to withdraw her hands, but in vain, and then, for one blissful moment for both, while the joyous tears gleamed through the shame-faced blushes of her delicate brunette comeliness, she let them remain there in his eager clasp.

Had she loved him in secret from the first? And was this passionate declaration, so dear, so momentous to the virgin heart, hitherto the haunt of hopes and longings, and a vague responsiveness, the sweeter for being so dimly understood, in harmonious accord with her heart's secret wish?

At all events, her hands remained passively in his but for an instant, and then she tore them away, wildly, almost terrifiedly.

"It cannot be!" she exclaimed. "This is sheer madness! Forget your utterance of those words, and leave me!"

"Not till I know your answer—whether I am beloved in return!"

"No, no, no!" still more wildly. "I tell you it is madness!"

"Only as all love is madness. Leah—darling—listen!"

Like all self-contained but powerful natures, the tide of his passion was flood-like and violent when once unpent.

He poured it forth in torrent-like words, in broken but burning sentences, till Leah—who, strange to tell of one of her beauty and matured youth, had never really been made love to before—was all but stunned by the whirlwind of his passion, which yet held her by the very storminess of its fascination.

"Do not consider me in this miserable lackadaisical disguise!" he exclaimed in conclusion. "It is in my own, my true character that I am now pouring out my heart, my soul to you, oh, my beloved! I have loved you almost from the first. Leah, you do not look as if you wholly

despised my suit. Be my wife. And henceforth inseparable, side by side, shoulder to shoulder, or with you upon my beating heart, we will master a hundred Thug Kings, were it needful, or a world in arms. Leah, Leah! make answer, my sweet. Tell me that you can and do love me in return!"

What need of all this to her?

At that moment he was before her, not in his dandified, Parisian make-up, but only as she had first known and loved him—yes, it was a heart confession that was even then burning in her cheeks, glistening in her tears—dark, silent, magnetic, falcon-eyed, nobly athletic, his whole personality instinct with reserved force and undemonstrative fearlessness!

And yet her cheeks suddenly paled, and once more she waved him back.

"I know, I know, I know!" she repeated huskily. "But for God's sake, unsay your words, or leave me—forever! It cannot, cannot be!"

He slowly rose to his feet, his face an agony of doubt and suspense.

"Perhaps you—you don't, or can't, love me?" he faltered.

"Love you!" her glowing and yet pain-drawn face, together with her outstretched arms and hands, with a strangely yearning and yet forbidding gesture, was a sufficient refutation of his doubts. "Do not ask me! And oh, Falconbridge, forget yourself, your better judgment, and fly from me, before my weakness conquers me, and bids you stay!"

She had also risen, quivering, and, as he tried to seize her in his arms again, she repulsed him almost furiously.

"What hysterical words are these?" he demanded. "You love me, and yet would bid me fly from you?"

"To the uttermost ends of the earth!" she cried. "Anywhere, anywhere, so that seas and continents are between us! Love you? Ha, ha, ha! What has that to do with it? My God! do you forget?"

"But, Leah, for heaven's sake, explain! Forget what?"

She had grown suddenly white and rigid, and the words fell from her icily, yet brokenly—fragments torn from a shattered heart.

"That I am—that man's daughter!"

And then her face was buried in her hands, her exquisite frame quivering with the dry, tearless sobs that are the convulsive thrappings of a moral and emotional organization at shipwreck with its hopes.

"By Heaven! I had forgotten it," cried the detective, half-bewilderedly; "but it was only because I hold it of so small account. Leah, give me your hands—look up to me!"

"No, no!" in a strangely muffled voice from her still unseen lips. "It is madness—a madness you will regret in your cooler moments. If you love me as I love you, I entreat you to leave—to forget me!"

"Forget you!" he broke into a wild laugh. "Easily done as said when one loves, isn't it? Leah, listen to me! But you shall listen!"

Throwing his strong arm about her, and forcibly drawing her banded head and hidden face upon his breast, he poured forth his love-tale afresh.

Or, rather, it was a new tale now. He told her of his own extraction, about which, by a strange coincidence, there had always hung a cloud of doubt and mystery, for which, however, he had never recked or grieved. His father, whom he had never known, was rumored to have ended badly, or, at least, unfortunately. His mother had died when he was a mere infant, and he had become the charge of an unwilling, forbidding relative, a feminine martinette, who had made his childhood and early youth a dreary treadmill life. Thence he had worked his way in the world, educating himself, withstanding trials and temptations. He had at last settled into his natural vocation, and a fair measure of desperately hard-earned reputation and success were at last come to him.

But never once had he loved till now, with her sweet image as his beacon-star.

What was he, then, to care for the unfortunate paternity of the idol of his heart? Did he not have his own closet-skeleton—that grisly phantom of all lovely and reminiscient hours?—and what human heart, that had toiled and grieved and suffered, but had the same.

He even drew the picture of his own antecedents in grimmer colors and harsher outlines than would have been borne out by the facts. And constantly, while talking thus soothingly and effectively, closer and yet closer he pressed to his bosom that drooping form and shame-bowed head, until at last there was no longer the need of his strong embrace to retain it there, in what seemed naturally its haven, its refuge and its home.

Suddenly, however, she started away from him and drew back.

"Wait!" she panted. "Let me think a moment—think and consider, rather than dream the dream of bliss and hope that may cause me to wrong you irreparably. Falconbridge, wait!"

"Leah, you must not wait! Love is impetuous, to whose divine commands we must surrender all or nothing, and with no hesitation, no

backward glance. Its world is of the future and of hope!"

She still hesitated, pallid and trembling still, as if divided by a hundred contending thoughts.

"Leah, my love, my darling! Be my wife, my bride, my treasure evermore!"

He stretched out his arms.

She gave a low, joyful and yet defeated cry, and then somehow was folded once more, of her own volition, unto his noble breast.

Caresses and loving, half-inarticulate words, and "kisses sweeter, sweeter than anything on earth!"

Then a long-drawn, clattering squawk in the adjoining public corridor interrupted them, and there was just time for a regaining of outward composure as Madame Vasquez's familiar knock came on the door.

She had been to her room after her drive, and entered as she was first introduced to the reader, with her owl-like looking, head-cocking green parrot on her shoulder.

"Such a delightful drive!" exclaimed the senora, settling herself into her favorite seat. *Buenas dias, monsieur!* Leah, my love, you should have been along. But *caramba!* have you two been quarreling and making up? You look brighter and happier than I have ever seen you before, both of you."

She put on her glasses, and looked at them critically.

"Better than fighting and shaking hands!" cried Monsieur Achille, laughing. "Can't affianced folks have their pleasures as well as others, senora?"

In his new-found joy, he was willing to look even indulgently upon her, spy, adventuress and dangerous mystery as he knew her to be.

"Ah, I see!" And she attempted a smile of *bonhomie*, which only distorted her harsh face the more, while the bird croaked and blinked knowingly.

"Nonsense!" interposed Leah, still fluttering.

"Achille, you must not exaggerate."

"Here there was a knock at the door, and Bell-boy 'Thomaso Jinks' put in an appearance.

"Ma'm," he said, addressing the senora with obsequious deference, "I hate to disturb your highness, but—"

"What is it, Thomaso?" demanded Madame Vasquez impatiently.

"Mr. Herman, the proprietor, ma'm! He would like to see you in his private office."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DEVELOPMENTS.

MADAME VASQUEZ had looked up in surprise, and with a flush in her harsh face.

"Me!" she exclaimed, haughtily. "You are quite sure, Thomaso, that it is to me Mr. Herman ventures to send thus peremptorily?"

"Sure as a shot-gun, ma'm!" was Tommy's ornate reply. "The governor doesn't look in the best humor in the world, either."

And he managed to give the two others a significant sign as the senora angrily swept out of the room, he in her wake, and the parrot uttering a farewell protest.

The lovers joined hands once more, and exchanged glances.

"What does it mean, do you think?" asked Leah.

Falconbridge patted her hand, and laughed.

"Disarrangement of our plans, I fear; that is, if the woman is about to receive notice to quit, as seems likely."

"And you would not like that?"

"By no means; it is better to have her near at hand, if we are ever to discover the secret of her connection with our arch-enemy."

"Very likely."

"Still, if her enforced retirement might only relieve you, my darling, of the accursed espionage that you have found so wearing, why—"

"Oh, never mind that!" Leah interrupted.

"Your plans must not be deranged, if we can help it."

"What! you could put up with that miserable spying yet longer?"

"Yes; or even worse miseries, now!" And she gave him a melting look.

There was a momentary embrace.

"I hope we shall be able to learn the upshot of this before I leave you." The detective then said, looking at his watch: "Eleven already!"

"You would leave me so soon?"

"Darling, I simply must."

"New business?"

"Yes. I would have told you before, but for a certain tender little episode which your threat to return to Amsterdam somehow precipitated."

Leah blushed her joy.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Mr. Van Ness is at last here in the interest of his firm's stolen diamonds. I am to meet him at noon."

At this juncture Justine returned.

"You are very prompt, my dear," said Leah, with an indulgent change in her manner which at once arrested the maid's secret attention.

"*Merci, mademoiselle!*" And then, after giving the result of her errand, and while demurely retreating toward the rear rooms: "Might I ask mademoiselle if the senora has returned from her drive?"

"Certainly, Justine. She was here a few moments ago, when Mr. Herman rather peremptorily sent a request see her in his private office."

For once, at least, Justine was thrown completely off her guard.

She stood stock-still, a look almost of terror springing into her face.

"Monsieur Herman, the proprietor?" she stammered.

Leah nodded.

"*C'est étrange!*" murmured the maid; and, quickly recovering her demure self-possession, she quitted the room.

A few moments later, Madame Vasquez returned.

She was in a towering rage.

"The man is a beast, a villain!" she exclaimed. "*Carajo!* I was never so insulted in my life—I, who never knew what it was to be insulted—a Vasquez by marriage, and with the best blood of Old Castile in my veins!"

"*Carajo! Caramba! hordido! chinzgado!*" (Squawk, squawk, squawk!) blasphemed the parrot, furiously ruffling his neck and flapping his wings. "An insult? Blue blood to the fore! Hang him! Burn him up! Kill him!" (Squawk, squawk!)

"Be quiet, or I'll wring your neck!" cried the senora furiously; and it was the first time they had seen her angry with the bird. "Oh, my dears!" melting for the instant from rage to pathos; "it is too terrible! I can't describe it."

"But, my dear madame, what can have happened?" inquired Leah, while Achille put on a look of no less concern. "Mr. Herman has seemed so gentlemanly, one can scarcely imagine that he would insult you."

"A *scelerato!* a beast! a hog!"

"But what has happened?"

Madame Vasquez seemed to be making heroic efforts at self-control, and at last with some measure of success.

"To think of it!" she exclaimed. "It seems, my child, that you have some money and jewels on deposit in the office safe."

"Yes; that is true."

"Well, it seems there has been a felonious attempt made upon the jewels. Something about a rascally bell-boy, with a forged note bearing your signature. But I couldn't or wouldn't understand the loathsome particulars. Enough for me that this beastly man, together with his beast of a detective, chooses to suspect me—me, Vasquez, a Castilian—of having been connected with the felonious plot."

"You?"

"But that isn't all. He chose to hint that your poor Justine might also be mixed up with it, as my—my sub-thief, I suppose!"

"Justine?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Rich, isn't it? However, it is only I whom he insists on finding accommodations elsewhere, kindly according me three days to take my time in. Ha, ha, ha!"

And her rough, fierce laughter rung jarringly through the room, while she seemed to fairly swell with her returning indignation and rage.

"But this is really most extraordinary!" exclaimed "Achille," sympathetically.

"Oh, never mind me, my dears!" cried the senora, again calming a little. "I know what my reputation is worth, and if this Americo-German beast doesn't pay for this, there are no longer judges and juries in the land. But—" she rose, laying one of her large, beringed hands upon her heart—"now comes the reaction. One can't help being a woman, my dears."

"No, indeed!" And Leah, more than ever against her secret repugnance, ran across the room to her, with a show of sympathy. "What shall I do for you? Hadn't you better go to your room, and lie down?"

"I think I had, my dear," faintly. "By the way, it is so sultry! Might you be able to spare Justine, to fan me for half an hour or so?"

"Certainly."

And Justine, being forthwith summoned, assisted the senora from the apartments, to the accompaniment of a series of mournful croakings on the part of Pompo, the parrot.

Leah turned to her lover with a half-desperate look when they were once more alone.

"Oh, my friend!" she exclaimed; "this is the worst of it—this horrible dissimulation and hypocrisy that I daily, sometimes hourly, force myself to practice with that horrible old woman! I suppose it is necessary—indispensable—but a much longer continuance of it is more than I can bear."

He took her in his arms.

"It is necessary, my darling; but, trust me, it shall endure but little longer."

"But apart from the dishonesty, the self-contempt, of it all, it is so sickening, so nauseating! It is bad enough to practice it with Justine, but with that snaky-eyed, rock-featured hag!" she shuddered.

He managed to call back the smiles into her face at last—lovers seem to have a way of their own in effecting these metamorphoses.

"Now listen to me, my love," said the detective. "I shall most probably dine with Herr Van Ness at the St. Bride's, and after that return here for you at, say, two o'clock."

"The St. Bride's! He is there?"

"Yes; queer coincidence, eh? However, the St. Bride's is almost as much a favorite with foreigners as the Amsterdam."

"Have you seen Herr Van Ness yet?"

"Only to introduce myself on the steamship pier early this morning. He was used up by the voyage, which had been stormy, and made the present appointment."

"I remember both Herr Van Ness and Herr Teneycke very well. Herr Van Ness is the nicer of the two."

"Glad to hear it."

"A short-necked, corpulent gentleman, with twinkling black eyes and a shrewd face?"

"Exactly; a typical Dutchman, such as our top-lofty Knickerbockers boast their ancestry from, no doubt."

"And you will return for me at two o'clock?"

"Yes."

"For anything special?"

"I should say so. Those diamonds must be transferred to a safe deposit company's vaults without any delay."

"Ah! Mr. Herman will not be responsible for them any longer?"

"So he said, and he generally means what he says. Don't worry, my own! You will be under my escort."

"Still, everything considered, is there not a risk?"

"I have thought of that." He reflected. "By the way, what sort of a package do the diamonds make?"

"They are cotton-wrapped in a pretty little single-bonbon box, tied with pink silk, and inscribed with my name, of course."

"If we only had a duplicate of that little box!"

She understood him at once.

"Wait!"

She went to one of her trunks in an adjoining room, and returned with such another little box as she had described, even to the pink silk that tied it.

"It is exactly like," she said. "I have half a dozen of them, for that matter."

"This is fortunate," said the detective. "No one else knows of this, I hope. No? That is well. Pray, inscribe it just as you did the one in the office safe against my return."

Then, with a parting embrace, he hurried away.

He had occasion to first visit his own room, which opened upon a narrow, somewhat gloomy, often little-frequented corridor, well into the interior of the large building, and communicating only after several devious turns with the larger and more public passage with which both Leah's suite and Madame Vasquez's room connected.

As he was stepping back out of the room, locking the door behind him, a soft voice, and yet with an irritable thrill in it addressed him:

"Monsieur!"

He started as he recognized Justine in the semi-gloom of the passage, and then drew himself up with a cold bow.

"Well, my child?"

Falconbridge had nothing to reproach himself with in his course with the French maid.

True, and with Leah's full knowledge, his familiarity with the girl had gone on, but not any more increasingly than he could help—rather the reverse, of late, in fact—and the disposition, if any, to make it more intimate, or perhaps compromising, had been wholly on her part.

Justine's eyes flashed, and her face was set and pale, though she was maintaining her self-control.

"Monsieur," she said, "you must meet me here in this corridor to-night—say eleven o'clock. I shall expect you."

"Justine, it will not be possible."

"It shall be possible!"

"Dame! what the deuce do you mean?"

"This: That you owe me an explanation."

"You forget yourself. I deny the debt, and refuse the payment demanded."

"Will you come?"

"Not for the interview you request."

"I request nothing, but command! Wait before you decide rashly to defy me." With her hand clutching his arm, she leaned to him so closely that her breath was warm on his cheek, whispering: "I can and will betray the secret of Madame Vasquez's connection with *Le Monarque des Etrangleurs*, if you promise to meet me, or something else equally startling to you. Shall I expect you?"

"Yes," he unhesitatingly replied.

Before he could prevent her, she threw her arms around his neck, kissed him, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DUTCH MERCHANT'S OFFER.

HERR VAN NESS, the senior member of the rich Amsterdam firm of diamond-dealers, in whose service poor Joseph Isaacstein had lost his life, together with two hundred thousand dollars' worth of their property, was very much as Leah had characterized him, fat, rubicund and jovial, but first, last and all the time with a keen business eye for the main chance.

He also spoke English and French, together possibly with other languages, with almost as

much fluency as his native Dutch, and was a thorough man of the world.

It was in French, however, that his conversation with the detective was carried on at the dinner they were partaking of together, and for obvious reasons.

For, while the secret of the detective's disguise was, as a matter of course, made known from the first, there were still the precautions to be preserved against possible espionage, notwithstanding that the repast was being served in a luxurious private parlor of the St. Bride's and with but one waiter, an expert colored man in attendance.

"You see, my dear Monsieur Flameaux," said Herr Van Ness, snapping his lips critically over his claret as the dessert was being placed on the table, "the case finally resolved itself with us into just this: Was there a possibility, however faint, of our recovering our property, even with the all but certain knowledge that it was in the possession of the notorious *Monarque des Etrangleurs*, the master-criminal and phenomenal intellectual monstrosity of the age?"

The particulars of the crime, together with what had already been accomplished in tracking the criminal, had been already thoroughly discussed.

The pseudo Monsieur Flameaux gravely nodded his head.

"Well," continued Herr Van Ness, "we decided that question in the affirmative and consequently I am here."

As the detective still made no answer, the other went on:

"From what you tell me of your extraordinary adventures, sir, I feel that the case could not be in more capable hands. What is your present outlook?"

"I shall down my man inside of six days, or sooner," Falconbridge replied.

"You feel confident of this, monsieur?"

"I shall do it, or not remain alive to report a failure."

"Good! I like you and your manner. But as to the stolen property now, no less than the criminal?"

"The recovery of your diamonds intact will probably accompany the capture of the criminal. I can promise no more than that. This much is certain, however, that not one of the jewels has as yet been converted into cash in this country, or most likely in any other."

"Ah! I can understand that probability. George Brookton never runs any risk in the disposition of plunder, and is never without ample means for his immediate expenses."

"That is most likely the truth."

"Yes; we pretty well informed ourselves as to this extraordinary villain's characteristics through the shrewdest police authorities of Paris, Berlin, London, and elsewhere abroad."

"Yes."

"And I also understand—chiefly, I confess, from your account of your all but miraculous escapes from death at his hands—that, even with his whereabouts known, to attempt to tackle him single-handed is a decidedly hazardous proceeding."

"You are under no misconception, mynheer. Apart from the man's individual desperateness and enormous strength, his power is extensive—reaching among many men, in all probability."

"Ah! those terrible Italian fellows you alluded to, besides the fellow you so cunningly put out of the way."

Falconbridge nodded.

"And yet you are still confident?"

"Perfectly so, mynheer."

"Now as to our property—the diamonds! Of course, we are quite as anxious to recover that as to secure the conviction of the criminal, if not more so."

"Naturally."

"Diamonds to the sale-value of two hundred thousand of your dollars, or, at a rough estimate, five hundred and twenty-five thousand Dutch guilders. That is a large sum of money, my friend. A particularly large sum to lose by robbery."

"To say nothing of murder as an accompaniment. Granted, mynheer Van Ness."

Herr Van Ness knitted his brows painfully, as the associative murder might have been altogether lost sight of up to this reminder of it.

"A good man, that Joseph Isaacstein! a good man and true!" he muttered, his forehead clearing. "We have no fault to find with him."

"It could hardly hurt him much if you had!" commented the detective, not a little disgusted.

"No, of course not," phlegmatically imperious to the sarcasm. "Poor Joseph! he is dead and at rest."

"In defense of your property."

"Yes, yes!" a little testily. "But property is property, my dear sir."

"And life is life!" persisted the other, reckless if this very Dutch merchant were offended or not.

Herr Van Ness burst into a queer cackling fat little laugh, though he did not seem really displeased.

"We may come to that part of it, after awhile, monsieur," said he.

"Very well, mynheer."

"What I have been wanting to get at is this:

We have concluded to offer a large reward for the recovery of our property, irrespective of the arrest or conviction of the criminal."

"Ah, I see; the restoration of your property, even if you have to make a compromise with the blood-stained wretch to enable you to obtain it!"

Herr Van Ness smiled good-naturedly, replenished his guest's glass and then his own with the decidedly good wine that was before them, and smiled.

"You are only half-right, my son," he responded amiably. "To effect that end—at once and without delay—it would be indispensable that we make our offer public, so that the criminal might know of its existence, which we have no intention of doing—at least for the present."

"Oh!"

"That is it, monsieur. As a first attempt at the recovery of our diamonds, I am empowered to make the offer first to you, privately and individually."

"Oh!" repeated the detective, not a little surprised.

"I therefore make you this offer. Effect the restoration of our property, intact, within the period you promise for the 'downing of the man,' and the reward—twenty thousand dollars in American money—is yours; or that proportion of the sum which shall correspond with a like proportion of the property recovered."

He drew forth a couple of neatly folded documents, and spread them out.

"Here," he said, "is the invoice of the stolen diamonds, particularized, no less than itemized, by which the gems can be readily identified individually. And here, in this other paper, is our signed agreement on the conditional payment of the reward I have mentioned, which paper is at your disposal, if you accept the proposition as made."

"I do accept, mynheer, and will do my best!" exclaimed the detective, whose eyes had secretly glistened, and he took the paper forthwith.

"So that is settled!" And sipping his wine, Herr Van Ness lighted a fresh cheroot, and rubbed his fat hands with no little satisfaction. "And now, my friend, for the human part of the affair. The reward that our firm have determined upon to offer for the arrest and conviction of the dastardly assassin of our faithful and unfortunate agent, Joseph Isaacstein, is another matter, to be considered apart."

"Come," thought Falconbridge, "I was a little hasty with the Dutchmen. There is something human in them, after all." But he at once said aloud, and somewhat sternly: "That must not be considered, Herr Van Ness. The bringing of that monster to justice, and the avenging of Herr Isaacstein's death, is a personal, self-devoted task of my own, in which money considerations must not enter."

"And why, my friend?" asked Herr Van Ness, a little bewilderedly.

"For these reasons, mynheer," was the deliberated reply: "In the first place, the murdered man was my friend; and, in the second place, his granddaughter, and sole surviving near blood relative, Mademoiselle Leah Gersacht, is my affianced wife."

Herr Van Ness was delighted to hear it. He even rushed around the table to embrace his guest in the ardor of his congratulation.

"The little vraulem!" he exclaimed. "I have known her from a child. But she was more in Paris than in Holland as she grew up. The pretty little Leah! Why, she must have grown into a beautiful and fascinating young woman by this time, my friend."

"I may be a little prejudiced in her favor, mynheer," replied Falconbridge, smiling, "but I can scarcely say that I find the young lady the reverse of your rosy anticipation."

Whereupon Herr Van Ness forthwith invited himself to call upon Miss Gersacht at the Hotel d'Amsterdam in the evening of that very day; and, as Falconbridge considered that such a visit might be an agreeable change for her, he at once lent himself to the proposition.

Midway back to the Hotel d'Amsterdam, and while passing through a quiet cross-street, Tommy Dodd cautiously signaled him from a neighboring doorway nook.

"What is it?" inquired the detective.

"Danger ahead."

"Specify it."

"That bottled-up garlic-eater, Giuseppi Malletto!"

"Well?" impatiently.

"He has succeeded in getting a lawyer at last, and his case is to come before the court tomorrow."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE BONBON DIAMONDS AGAIN.

THIS information was an unexpected blow for the detective.

He reflected.

"How did you learn this?" he inquired at last.

"The old girl didn't have any special use for me, so it occurred to me to run down to the Tombs and see how Giuseppi was getting along."

"Can he have communicated with the Thug King yet?"

"I think not. Were such the case, I would have detected it in the senora's manner, or some one of her Spanish confabs with Justine."

"What lawyer has Giuseppe succeeded in engaging?"

"Finnerty."

"Ha! An unprincipled shyster, but still a man who has reason to fear me."

"I know the duck, boss."

"What court to-morrow?"

"General Sessions, Judge Crowder."

"How many interviews has Giuseppe had with Finnerty thus far?"

"Only one."

"When?"

"Early this morning."

"Long or short?"

"Very brief."

"Ha! The Italian would scarcely have dared to give away his connection with the Thug King on so slight an acquaintance. However, no risks must be taken. What shall you be doing for the senora this afternoon?"

"You'll have to tell me what you will be doing first boss, before I can answer the question."

"Ah, I understand." And the detective forthwith explained his appointment with Mlle. Gersacht.

Tommy grinned.

"I'll be at your heels then, as a matter of course," said he. "You must know by this time, boss, that the old girl is quite as curious of the movements of Monsieur Achille Flameaux as she formerly was of those of Major Falconbridge, the Falcon Detective."

"True. These are my instructions then: Shadow us, for form's sake, till we are safely within the vaults of the Manhattan Safe Deposit Company. Then cut for the Tombs, and notify Lawyer Finnerty that I shall expect a visit from him at my room to-morrow morning at eight."

"Suppose he should refuse, boss."

"Tell him I shall take no refusal without considering it a deliberate defiance on his part. That will settle him."

They guardedly separated, proceeding to the hotel by different routes.

Half an hour later Leah and her lover entered a *coupe*, whose driver had received his instructions.

Falconbridge had formally received the diamonds from her at the hotel desk, after she had signed a receipt for their return; and, as he had carefully bestowed the tiny package in an inside breast-pocket of his Prince Albert coat, and buttoned his spring overcoat up over that, no secret had been made of their intentions with regard to the future safe-keeping of the jewels.

Scarcely, however, had the *coupe* proceeded more than a block before a change had been effected, though not without some blushes on the part of Mlle. Gersacht.

The dainty box in the detective's breast-pocket was now merely the duplicate of the original one in appearance, but empty, save for a stuffing of cotton-batting.

The little box containing the diamonds was hidden away in a favorite place of concealment and security with many women—i. e., snugly stowed away in the top of her stocking, just below the garter's elastic clasp.

"I hope we have our treasure safe at last," murmured Leah, with a last pretty blush.

"So do I," was her lover's smiling response.

"It will certainly take the divination of a Genius to guess at the change we have just made."

Leah slightly paled.

"And yet that terrible man!" she faltered.

"Was not his divination almost superhuman when he hurled you from the Elevated car in his woman's disguise?"

The detective affected a carelessness he did not altogether feel.

"That was different," said he. "It is one thing to track a man, and quite another thing to divine what he may do in a close carriage, which even its driver cannot look into at the time."

"Still, by our own account, he must have divined your intentions to have been able to track you so unerringly as he did."

He still made light of her fears, and smilingly kissed the troubled little face at his side.

"Away with these forebodings, my darling!" he chided, with his deep, soft smile.

"But I cannot help them, love."

"Do you forget that it was Falconbridge, the undisguised detective, who was tracked that day, and not Monsieur Achille Flameaux, the happy Frenchman this moment at your side?"

She smiled, and yet without wholly dissipating her troubled look.

"Oh, how can I help mistrusting my very shadow?" she murmured. "If we could only solve the mystery of this constant espionage on the part of Madame Vasquez and my maid, it would be some relief."

"Courage! we may be nearer the solution of that mystery than you think."

He had already told her frankly of his brief interview with Justine in the narrow corridor,

and his promised appointment with the young woman in which it had resulted.

"I have been turning it over in my mind," said Leah, "and I cannot place much hope in those strange words of Justine's in which you seem to place so much confidence."

"Why?"

"Tell me her parting words over again, as exactly as you can recall them."

"I can recall them perfectly. They were these: 'I can and will betray the secret of Madame Vasquez's connection with *le Monarque des Strangleurs*, if you promise to meet me, or something else equally startling to you.'"

"Ah! there was her saving clause—her loophole of escape from the promised disclosure."

"What clause?"

"This: 'Or something else equally startling to you.'"

"Oh!"

"She probably merely wants a last chance to fascinate you away from me."

"She can hardly be such a fool."

"My dear, a woman is never or always a fool when she is in love, I am at a loss to tell which."

"But this is preposterous!"

"Not at all."

"The girl has been merely practicing upon me in the Vasquez interest, as she did upon Falconbridge before me."

"There is more than that now."

"You really think so, Leah?"

"Yes; she is no longer in the Vasquez interest so far as you are concerned. She has come to love, or at least to develop a passion for you. For all her beauty and simulated demureness, there is something desperate in the girl's character which makes me fear her."

"But why would she have also displayed a passion, real or pretended, for me in my own proper character?"

"Ah, if you were anything else than your dear, noble, magnetic self in any character!"

"My darling! But, apart from the nonsense of all this, do you never mistrust me in the dangerous but necessary game that I must still play with such a woman?"

"Never."

"Why?"

"I suppose it is because I have no less confidence in your honor—your fidelity—than in your love."

"And Justine could not cause you to be jealous now?"

"I think not." With a loving look.

"But how about the foregoing period—before my declaration and understanding of this morning, you know?"

"Don't ask me about them; at all events, I shall not answer you."

He kissed her, his eyes sparkling with pleasure and pride.

But at this juncture certain unusual disturbing street-sounds, which had been augmenting without their consciousness, swelled apace.

Both Leah and Falconbridge drew down a window to look out.

Their *coupe* had become one of a tangle of slowly-moving vehicles and teams, whose drivers were looking interested or anxious.

Furious shouts and cries rose upon the air from some distance ahead.

Pedestrians were hurrying along the sidewalks in one direction, and in more or less excitement.

"To the deuce wid them Eytalian, anyway!" a near-at-hand cabman was heard to exclaim.

"What's the odds to us, if it's always among themselves?" another replied.

Just here the *coupe* came to a jarring halt, and its tangle seemed inextricable.

"What is the matter?" Falconbridge called out to the driver.

"It's a riot, sor!" replied the man, without venturing to turn his head.

"A riot?"

"Yis, sor. Thim Eytalian blasters in the soobway iccavation are havin' a Donnybrook Fair av a free fight among themselves, wid the rocks flyin' an' the dirty knives glistenin'. But divil a well-broken head yit, so far as I can see!" in a tone of unmitigated contempt.

Italians and blasters!

Leah seized her lover's arm in sudden terror.

"Order him to drive back, if possible!" she hoarsely whispered.

"But, my dear, it isn't possible. Besides, there is our destination right at the end of this block."

"Still, this peril may have been specially contrived for us. The diamonds!"

"Hush!—Ha! there are the blue-coats at last."

Then the street-tangle was somewhat unraveled, or partly so, and their *coupe* was comparatively isolated for the moment.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN THE THICK OF IT

"Warp ahead!" called out the detective, notwithstanding a fresh warning from Leah, who was still clutching his arm as he peered out forward, past the driver's seated figure, upon the turbulent scene.

"There's our destination on the corner beyond."

As the man obeyed, and the *coupe* was hurried forward with a sudden jerk, Falconbridge dropped back into his seat and drew up both curtains and sashes on either side.

"Heavens!" gasped Leah, who had become very white.

"Courage, my love!" he smilingly replied, though with his hand already on his revolver. "Very likely it will amount to nothing."

But, unsuspected by her, he had recognized among the rioters several swarthy faces that had surrounded him in the Washington Heights blasting-ground.

Then the *coupe* came to a fresh and violent stop, and, just as the unfortunate driver was observed to fall forward, stricken senseless by a random brick, it seemed to have become the very center of a howling and demoniac mob.

The detective threw his left arm protectively around his companion, while his revolver glistened in his other hand.

"Remember, it is I who am supposed to be the jewel-bearer," he whispered. "Should the worst come to the worst, do you make tracks for the deposit vaults, leaving me to cheat them off the *coupe*."

A gesture of passionate dissent was her answer.

At that instant both windows were simultaneously dashed in by missiles, and their laps were covered with broken glass.

At the same moment, the *coupe*, as if torn from its team and uprooted from the ground, rocked about like a cockle-shell upon sharp harbor waves, while the surrounding air was furious with oaths and cries in foreign tongues.

Then one voice, in broken English, made itself apparent to their ears.

"Tear 'em out!" was the substance of its utterance. "One of the two, *most likely the girl*, has the diamonds."

"Cling to me!" ordered the detective, in his low, metallic voice.

With that he summarily burst open the coach-door on his side, and sprung out, with Leah as though glued to his back.

Twenty or more rioters surrounded them with a suddenness and unanimity that left no further doubt as to the fight among themselves being a sham one, for the express purpose of hustling the young couple.

"Back!" roared the detective. "Scoundrels! robbers! back, or—"

But both he and Leah, who still clung to him, were already being thrust this way and that, the crowd pressing closer and closer, while still keeping up the appearance of an intestine fight, and even as he spoke, a huge ruffian who seemed to be something of a leader, flashed a murderous-looking stiletto threateningly before his eyes.

"The diamonds!" hissed the bravo. "One of you has got them, and—"

The detective's weapon barked, and the man fell a corpse, with its bullet in his heart.

For a moment the ruffians seemed panic-stricken, but again they closed about the devoted pair, yelling for blood.

One, two, three, four, five! the remaining shots of the detective were discharged right and left, with more or less effect.

But Leah had already been torn from his grasp, and now, with clinched fist and clubbed pistol, he was fighting like a fiend.

"Stand to it, major!" shouted an encouraging voice from somewhere. "Here we come!"

Then there was a rush, a panic, and, somewhat bruised but not materially injured, he was among the bluecoats.

"My companion! My betrothed!" gasped Falconbridge, wholly dazed for the time being.

"Oh, the young lady?" said the roundsman, an old acquaintance, who had kindly grasped his arm, while the other members of the squad were clubbing or pursuing the foreigners right and left. "There she is over yonder, safe and sound. Our sergeant looked after her a moment or two after you were separated."

Falconbridge made a few hurried acknowledgments and explanations, and then hastened to an adjoining doorway, in which he now perceived Leah standing, composed, but with a pitifully hopeless look in her face and eyes.

The sergeant who had befriended her touched his cap to the disguised detective, and then drove back the gathering crowd, thus leaving the lovers momentarily alone in the house-vestibule.

As Falconbridge pressed Leah's hand reassuringly, he laughed and directed her attention to his coats, both of which, top and under, had been torn open.

"Courage!" he said. "Our trick foiled the villains completely. The duplicate jewel-box is in their hands."

"Falconbridge, all is lost!" she faltered. "So to the real one!"

His countenance fell, and then for the first time he fully comprehended her crushed, hopeless aspect.

"You can't mean it!" he ejaculated.

"It is true!"

"But it was in your—your stocking."

A burning blush suffused her pallid face.

"Oh, my beloved!" she managed to answer, while struggling not to break down completely. "I was horribly insulted, and all in a flash. It was before the officer came to my help—the very instant after I was separated from you following upon your first shot. Then, as he was assisting me to this point, I—I knew that the precious little box was—was no longer in the place where I had concealed it."

"It can't be helped. Fate, or the devil himself, seems against us. Come!"

The street had been cleared of the disturbance, but looked like a Paris barricade after an unsuccessful *emeute*.

The *coupe* was on its side, and battered almost out of recognition. Its driver, with blood on his face and neck, was looking over his horse at the opposite side of the street. Shop-windows and glass doors were smashed here and there. Ambulances were already on the spot, and one burly form still lay, with a group of men around it, motionless where it had fallen, with the detective's initial bullet in the heart.

The sergeant, who had already exchanged some words with Leah, and thereby received an inkling of the inner explanation of the affair, now came back to where they were standing.

"You did pretty well, major," he said. "One man dead and three wounded, two of them perhaps

mortally, is a fair enough record for any man in such a pinch."

"Two or three words in your ear, sergeant, if you please," said the detective. And then, after some further explanation, he added: "You will now see the importance to me of maintaining my fictitious character."

"I see," And the officer nodded.

"But how did the roudsman, who led the squad to my assistance, discover my identity?"

"I gave him the hint, after catching a hint of it from some excited words on the part of the young lady. But leave it to me. It shall only be in your assumed character that the reporters shall get hold of the affair."

"A thousand thanks!"

"But the young lady's diamonds! They are really gone?"

"I should say so. Look here!" and the detective displayed his buttonless coat fronts, together with the inner breast-pocket ruthlessly ripped down the seam.

"Too bad! Should have thought you would have resorted to some ruse. But then who could have anticipated such a plot, and we can always think of precautions when too late."

And the sergeant hurried away to look after several prisoners who had been taken.

Another conveyance was secured, and the lovers returned to their hotel, with scarcely the interchange of a dozen more words, though Leah pressed very close and caressingly to Falconbridge's side during the return drive, with her hands clasped in his.

However, as they were re-entering her apartments, she whispered entreatingly:

"Don't leave me, at least for the present. I can't bear to think of it."

He kissed her reassuringly, though naturally anxious now as to what Tommy might have to report to him later on.

But present peace, howsoever brief, was not yet in store for them.

The news of their peril and misfortune had preceded their return to the hotel, where nobody was thinking or talking of much of anything else; and they were no sooner heard to enter the suite than Justine flew to her young mistress in an admirably acted ecstasy of congratulation and gratitude.

"Oh, mademoiselle, to think of it!" she exclaimed, fluttering here and there, while assisting Leah with her cloak and hat, the tears in her eyes, her face the picture of sympathetic concern. "One of the porters brought the intelligence ten minutes ago, and it spread like wild-fire. *Ma s, grace a Dieu!* you are safe, you are unhurt. And monsieur, too; but oh!" clasping her hands, "with his garments in shreds! And then the diamonds. Oh, mademoiselle, can it be that they are gone? *Les coquins! les desperes!*"

"Yes, yes!" and Leah sunk into a seat, miserable and inert; "but that will do, my dear. My smelling salts and some wine!"

But the restoratives demanded were hardly forthcoming, when, with a heralding squawk, the senora put in her unwelcome appearance, hand in air, consternation in face and mien, the inevitable green bird on his accustomed shoulder perch.

The senora was even more voluble than the maid, and poor Leah was becoming little short of hysterical, when her "Achille" came to her rescue.

"Mademoiselle Gersacht must not be questioned nor further annoyed!" he said, with a peremptory sternness to which they were little accustomed in his ordinarily well-assumed polite nimbleness. "She must lie down to rest, and to sleep, if possible."

And, forthwith bowing Madame Vasquez out of the room, and giving Justine further orders as to the bringing of certain sedatives, he made her lie down, after darkening the room, and did not think of leaving her until she had finally lapsed into a soft and recuperative sleep.

But as he was passing the senora's door, perhaps two hours later, while about to seek his own room, for the purpose of much-needed repairs in his toilette, Madame Vasquez stepped out, and entreated a moment's delay with one of her large gestures.

In none of the best humors, the pseudo-Achille submitted.

As he did so, he caught a fleeting glance of the room's interior before she had quite closed the door behind her.

That glance showed him Tommy Dodd, teasing the parrot, beside a table containing wine and biscuits, and who managed to throw him a cheerily significant look.

"What is it, belle madame?" demanded the detective, with a prudent return to his Parisian *finesse*. "Ah! you are more polite than a while ago," she sneered, in a guarded voice.

"If I was anything else," he shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands deprecatingly, "madame will assuredly have the goodness of heart to be lenient. The circumstances—"

"Oh, never mind, monsieur," and she deigned to smile in her distorted way. "Only monsieur's brusquerie delayed a piece of news I had for him that might have been of importance."

"Ah, belle madame! pray continue your magnanimity by explaining. I am desolate! at having incurred madame's displeasure."

"N'importe! There was a man at your room to see you."

"When?"

"Shortly after your quitting the hotel with Mademoiselle Gersacht."

"Ah, indeed!"

"A man who seemed greatly disappointed at not finding monsieur at home."

"Dame! Too bad!"

"My door chanced to be on the jar, and the disappointed gentleman ventured to make inquiries of me."

"How annoying that must have been, dear madame!"

"I managed to put up with it. You must know how fond of you I have always been."

"Can I doubt it? *Ci ere* madame, I am an orphan to whom such motherliness as yours is like dew upon a lacerated heart."

"We exchanged some words, in the course of which the gentleman mentioned his name."

"He had a name, then? Fortunate man!"

His self-possessed unconcern was beginning to chafe her, as he intended it should.

"You do not seem over-inquisitive as to this disappointed caller, monsieur?"

"Ah, madame," with a languid indifference, "but there are callers and callers!"

"But, strange to say, this one did not understand a word of French. I tested him."

"Ah! but madame's French—it is so characteristic, so original."

"Monsieur is sarcastic. I fear I shall get angry."

"Oh, madame! Sarcastic? I?"

"No matter. The man was a Signor Finnerty."

"Ah, indeed! Finnerty—Finnerty? What odd appellations seem to abound here in America! Probably an *Irlandois*, or may be a German?"

"He was cautious, and yet slightly communicative, this Signor Finnerty. One thing I gathered from his conversation, if nothing more. He was interested in seeing you with regard to one of his clients, a poor prisoner in the Tombs—a Giuseppe Malletto!"

And she watched the effect of her words with eyes that might have bored into his brain.

But "Monsieur Achille" was thoroughly upon his guard.

"Diable!" he exclaimed, with perfectly simulated surprise. That Genoese rascal who undertook to pass a counterfeit coin upon me? This must be seen to. Madame, I kiss your hands."

And he coolly resumed his way as the senora, in evident disappointment, flounced back into her room, slamming the door behind her with a furious bang.

CHAPTER XL.

MISTS.

ONCE in the privacy of his room, however, the easy assurance which the detective had maintained so airily gave way to troubled thoughts.

Flinging aside his coats and waistcoat, he tarried midway in his contemplated toilette, and sinking into a chair, with his hands plunged in his trousers pockets, his head bowed upon his breast, he gave way to alternate dejection and rage, enlivened by the swiftly-succeeding plottings and analyses of his busy brain.

How had this shyster Finnerty forestalled Tommy Dodd, and what had been the extent of his disclosures to the Spanish adventuress with respect to Giuseppe's disclosures to him, whatever those latter might have been?

Mists, mists, settling and sweeping, whirling or quiescent but always mists, mists impenetrable, or showing a sun or moon-shaft now and then but for a fleeting and cheating moment, only to make the obscurity more tantalizing and dense.

Would he ever see the blessed day again, or must he go on stumbling and groping among them forever, with mystery at one elbow, treachery at the other, and murderous revenge, in the shape of the Thug King's hideous cunning and influence, more or less hot-breathed over this or that shoulder upon his neck, in his hair or upon his cheek?

However, he presently came to the conclusion that, at all events, Madame Vasquez could not have obtained enough information respecting the caged Italian to seriously arouse her suspicions as to his (the detective's) real identity—at least, not as yet.

"No, no!" he muttered. "But if my secret is still safe, how long is it to remain so? By Jupiter! I must find where to strike, and then strike with a vengeance, and that, perhaps, while only risking a delay of hours, instead of days, or all may be lost at any moment. However, Tommy Dodd's report is still to come, while there is still that appointment with Justine, which may give me a fresh outlook into the infernal complication."

Flinging off his depression by a great effort, he compelled himself to the toilette duties before him; and then, a little later on, he issued from his room as fresh and elegant as if just stepping into the *Rue des Italiens* out of a swell Paris club-house.

His first anxiety was for Leah, whom he found awake and much invigorated by her soothing sleep.

"Do not fear for me," she murmured. "I am quite myself again, and shall be ready to entertain Herr Van Ness as agreeably as may be when he comes this evening. By the way, at what hour, do you think, I should expect him?"

"Between seven and eight, I should say. You will have some refreshments, perhaps?"

"I have given my orders to that effect."

"A good thing! I would suggest," after a moment's pondering, "that madame be invited to drop in during the evening, and that Justine be kept in sight, as an attendant you know, as much as possible."

"You are in earnest?"

"Perfectly."

"As regards the senora?"

"Especially in that regard."

"Tell me why."

"Leah, the woman is on the brink of discovering my identity, if her suspicions have not already been vaguely aroused to that end." Here he related his colloquy with the senora. "What is done must be done quickly, and I feel instinctively that we are on the verge of a revelation—perhaps of the *denouement*. If it can be precipitated, so much the better."

"I understand. However, the woman will be pretty sure to drop in on us of her own accord."

"You won't have to stand this sort of thing much longer, I feel confident of it. Better invite her, with all the show of cordiality you can stand without nausea."

"I shall invite her."

"As for Justine, I could keep my appointment with her even during your little entertainment, without serious interruption. The girl will manage it somehow. And I shall obtain her promised disclosure, good, bad or indifferent."

"That is well, I think."

They were entirely alone, without fear of intrusion, during these exchanges, Justine having been sent away on a convenient errand.

"You are not so fearful of my being away from you now?"

"Not if you will not be long away."

"I must see Tommy at the earliest moment, and shall be with you again directly after dinner. *Au revoir!*"

He kissed her, and hurried away.

Descending to the office, the detective was not long in exchanging a signal with Tommy, who was once more with his pseudo-associates on the bell-boys' bench.

They met a few minutes later in an unfrequented corridor in the lower part of the building.

"What was the meaning," demanded the detective, sternly, "of that fellow Finnerty seeking me here without notification or warning?"

"Shoot me if I know, boss!" was the reply. "I shadowed you as far as the street-fight, and then, according to instructions from you, hurried on down to the Tombs in search of the shyster, with your message."

"Well?"

"Wasn't to be found—that's all. Was probably on biz 'way up here to see you on his own hook. And I haven't a doubt but what he will be here again shortly."

"You think so?"

"Yes; Ryan, my chum on the bench up yonder, chanced to note the man particularly. And he says the fellow manifested a desire to hang around and wait. Besides, didn't the senora and Justine discuss the chap in Spanish right under my ears?"

"Ah! that wasn't bad. How much did Finnerty give himself away to the senora?"

"Well, not as much as she pretends to you, perhaps, but enough to set her thinking."

"How much?"

"He only mentioned his client's name as that of an alleged shover of the queer, in whose conviction Monsieur Flameaux was interested. But he also gave hints as to how Miss Gersacht and you have been befriending his client's wife."

The detective drew a long breath.

"Is that all?"

"Well, boss, that chap Finnerty is a sly dog, you know."

"Yes—yes—"

"Well, he must also have hinted that there was some sort of mystery about you it would be worth the old girl's while to know—for a consideration. So I gathered from the women's conversation at least."

"And the consideration—was it not forthcoming?"

"I think not, or it may be that Finnerty wasn't really primed as much as he pretended or hoped to be. Anyway, madame ain't any the wiser as to the real cause of Giuseppe's bein' so long bottled up; though, as I said, she's got her thinking-cap on."

"That will do, my lad," said the detective, after a pause. "In the meantime, be doubly on the alert. I have an instinct that affairs are at a crisis, or nearly so."

"So have I. But hold on, boss! I've more for you than what you've got."

"More yet?"

"Yes. Not findin' Finnerty, I ventured on a move on my own risk."

"What was it?"

"The warden of the Tombs knows me like a book, through my serving you so long, you know."

"Very likely."

"Well, I improved the opportunity to obtain a brief interview with the garlic-eater."

Falconbridge started.

"Why, the man must know you by sight in your connection with me."

"Mistake! Or, if he did, he failed to recognize me in my hotel buttons and short hair."

"You made sure of that?"

"Before I let myself out, you can bet high on that, boss. Besides, I interviewed him altogether in the interest of Madame Vasquez."

"So! And did that win his confidence?"

"To a certain extent. Macaroni ain't altogether a slouch, in his way. He can be dumb as a fish, or garrulous as a mill-clapper, on occasion?"

"Well, upon this occasion?"

"Betwixt and between—first the one, then the other, and always on the snuff for toasted cheese in a mouse-trap."

"Did you draw anything out of him about Madame Vasquez?"

"Only the inference that she is doubtless doing the double act, no less than yourself."

"How?"

"That she is some one else in disguise."

Falconbridge again started.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Only one thing more, boss. When Macaroni's passions are aroused on a certain point, he seems to forget cunning, caution, everything else, for the time being. Well, he happened to touch upon that point to-day."

"What is it?"

"A young lady, Miss Dagmar Gersacht."

"Miss Dagmar Gersacht?" repeated the detective, astonished.

"That is it, boss."

"What of her?"

"She is the young person upon whom Giuseppe is loony. There is probably just one person in the world whom he both loves and hates to madness, and that person is Miss Dagmar Gersacht."

CHAPTER XLI.

DISCLOSURES.

"But the girl is dead!" exclaimed Falconbridge, after another pause.

Tommy shook his head sagaciously.

"Not much!"

"Explain."

"She doubtless thought she was going to die when you found the unsigned writing left by her in that lonesome house. But, from what Giuseppe let out in his ravings to me, she must have thought better of it mighty soon after writing it—probably in a fit of loneliness and despondency. Even the knife-thrust which Giuseppe had given her, couldn't have amounted to much, having been turned aside by a corset-bone."

Falconbridge stared.

"Which Giuseppe gave her?" he echoed, almost as dazedly as before.

Tommy nodded.

"Why, the inference from that letter is unmistakable that her own father, the Thug King himself, must have stabbed her."

"Think it over again, boss. Or, have you still got the document with you?"

"No; I haven't it with me."

"Well, my remembrance is pretty good of the reading you let me have of it."

"The writer repeatedly said, 'I forgive you,' in indubitable allusion to her guilty father."

"True enough; but doesn't she also mention Malletto's name, and refer to him as that horrible man, that treacherous villain, or the like?"

"Yes."

"It all chimes in well enough with Giuseppe's half-incoherent give-away to me through the bars of his cell-door."

"The Italian evidently loves the young woman to distraction, or to the extent of making a crazy fool of himself at every opportunity, and the father probably doesn't care a nickel one way or the other; while, from what I can gather, Dagmar, while detesting the fellow on general principles, has not been averse to encouraging him to make a raving incomprehensible jackass of himself on occasion, for her own amusement."

"Not saying particular high jinks for the gal's principles, eh, boss?"

"Well, it seems the three of 'em were together in the mysterious house when the slashing occurred."

"As near as I can make out, Giuseppe, probably goaded to madness by the girl's heartless derision, suddenly fell upon her with his stiletto, and was chucked out of the window by the old gentleman for his cheek."

"Then both Brookton and Giuseppe took the alarm, and cut and run, leaving the girl in the house alone."

"She must have got over her dumps in a day or two, and rejoined her father about as good as new."

"That is the story, boss."

"Coming from any one else than you I would scarcely credit it for an instant," said Falconbridge, roughly. "The Italian must, indeed, have been in a raving fit, to let out all this to you, who were little more than a stranger to him."

"Don't forget, boss, if you please, that he supposed himself to be talking to one in Madame Vasquez's secret confidence, and that I was able to hoodwink him to that effect pretty convincingly."

"Your pardon, Tommy! that doubtless would make a difference."

"A big one!"

"Where does he think the father and girl are in hiding?"

"I doubt if he knows; though he would probably, if free, find means of communicating with them in short order."

"Did he describe the young woman to you?"

"Only with a lot of poetic gush, that left one no wiser than before. I tried to get a glance at his photograph of her, but, bless you! he'd have killed me for merely making the request if he could have got at me."

"Is it likely she would have given him her picture?"

"He gloried in the fact of having stolen it."

"Now as to this Madame Vasquez?"

"Boss, I really believe he is as much 'out' respecting the old girl's true character as we are."

"And yet you gathered from his hints that her present character is assumed."

"He thinks so, and that is all. I rather opine that he deems the woman some old pal of Brookton's—a female pal, of course—now doing this heavy Spanish act in her interest."

"And Justine?"

"He's still further out with regard to her. In fact, he couldn't place her at all, and seemed unable to comprehend her hand in the game."

Falconbridge drew another long breath, this time of something very like relief.

"It might be worse for us than it stands," he observed.

"That's so, boss; though there's no telling how things may jump along now."

"True. A word more before we separate. Do you fancy Giuseppe had told Finnerty as much as he told you?"

"Hardly; for, you see, the shyder, from his previous ignorance, wouldn't have known how to touch him up on the raw as I did with regard to the Dagmar business."

No more was said; and, half an hour later, directly after eating his dinner, Falconbridge perceived a man standing by the office counter, whom he at once recognized as the shyder lawyer, Finnerty.

The man turned with a start as the detective touched him on the shoulder.

"I believe I am the man you are seeking, sir," said Falconbridge, in a low voice, and forthwith dropping the French or broken English, one or the other of which he almost invariably used in conversation in and about the hotel.

Mr. Finnerty was a flashily-dressed, but distinctly unpleasant-looking young man, of thirty or thirty-five, with thin, insincere lips, a hooked nose, snaky, green eyes, neutral tinted hair and mustache, and a cast of countenance which may be described, suggestively, as Celtic-Hebraic, for want of a better characterization.

He gazed at the faultlessly-attired, Frenchified speaker with a surprised stare.

"You're 'out,' I fancy," he replied. "I never saw you before."

"Weren't you inquiring for some one at Room Number 37 early in the afternoon?"

"Yes.—Hullo! are you the French Monsieur Ackilly Flameaux?"

"Step aside with me, sir, and I shall at least convince you that I am the person you sought and seek."

"Well, I'll be eternally, teetotally slap-banged!"

Falconbridge abruptly led the way out of the main entrance, and across the thoroughfare.

"Hold on, Frenchy!" then exclaimed Mr. Finnerty, coming to a halt. "Where are you steering for?"

"For the neighboring public square, in which we shall doubtless find a private nook appropriate for our interview."

"Oh, that's all right; privacy's the cue, eh, Mr. Parley Woo? But hold on! Won't a gin-mill answer just as well?"

"No."

"I'm as thirsty as a gridiron; been spittin' cotton for ten minutes."

"Time enough to guzzle later on, if you choose. Come on!"

And Mr. Finnerty somehow did go on without fur-

ther demur, though secretly wondering at himself that he did not resent this decided cavalierliness on the part of his companion.

CHAPTER XLII.

IN MADISON SQUARE.

It was Madison Square toward which the disguised detective guided the way.

The April day had turned off chill and blushing, so that there were comparatively few occupants of public benches, and at last a spot was reached just off Twenty-sixth street, at the northern side of the Square, which, in spite of the neighboring electric lights, was wholly deserted for the time being.

Here the detective suddenly confronted his companion with a stern abruptness which caused the latter to start back.

"Do you know me?" he exclaimed.

"Why, of course, mounseer!" replied Finnerty, speedily recovering his impudence. "Or, if I don't, I intend we shall be a blamed sight better acquainted after our word-clappers have wagged a spell."

"Don't dare to trifle, Jake Finnerty, erstwhile Sneak Thief Jake! I ask once more if you know me."

"N-n-no! I—I-c-c-can't say as I do," was the now stammered response.

Falconbridge took off his hat, gently displaced his blonde wig a trifle, so as to afford a transient glimpse of the close-curling dark hair beneath, and then bent forward, that his strangely characteristic eyes might plunge their burning looks into his companion's.

"Now do you know me?" he hissed between his clinched teeth.

The shyder started back, with consternation in every line of his coarse, mean face.

"Oh, Lord, them eyes, them eyes!" he gasped out. "Major Jack Falconbridge, the Falcon Detective, or I hope I may be shot!"

"So then!" exclaimed Falconbridge, contemptuously; "this, my identity, then, was not one of your great newly discovered secrets you were to dicker for with either Madame Vasquez or Monsieur Achille Flameaux, according to which might make the highest bid?"

"No, not exactly," replied Finnerty, slowly recovering from his alarmed astonishment. "This, I—I suppose, was the great secret that blasted Italian was always a-goin' to tell me but jest quite didn't."

Then a sudden paroxysm of fury seized him.

"Curse the garlicky hound!" he cried, clinching his hands and stamping on the ground; "he shall pay for this. Blast his eyes! shover of the queer, eh! Worse than that! He's one of the smaller big guns of the Mafia itself, and I can prove it."

The Mafia is the criminal secret society among the Italian brigands and desperadoes of the boot-shaped peninsula whose dangerous ramifications in this country are every now and then coming forbid-dingly to light amid the crime development of New York City and elsewhere.

"So you have only just discovered that Giuseppe Malletto is one of the Mafia?" scornfully observed the disguised detective, notwithstanding that he himself was only now for the first time made aware of the fact.

"Oh," was the discontented response, "he let that out to me at the very first."

"I don't believe it."

"I'll swear to it, maje!"

"You to swear to anything!—the whilom Sneak Thief Jake Finnerty, who—"

"Oh, come now, major," pleadingly, "give us a rest! It would just ruin me for them antecedents to get out, and I'm really trying to be honest."

"As a Toombs shyder, on the lookout for plunder-divisions and blackmail!"

"No, no, 'pon honor!"

"Ho-or?"

Finnerty thrust his hands in his pockets and hung his head pathetically.

"Well, I'll let up on you a bit," said Falconbridge, still sternly, however. "What else do you know about the Mafia?"

"All that Giuseppe could tell me."

"He wouldn't have been likely to give away such terrible secret society revelations."

"Only through his cowardice. The man is half beside himself lest he be railroaded on account of that bogus half-dollar."

"And is yet eager for a court examination, which you had arranged to come off in the Court of General Sessions to-morrow?"

"That's where he has hoodwinked me. This secret of your identity is what he must have wanted to bring out, or half-bring out, in court, to force you to come to his rescue, and withdraw the counterfeiting charge—blast his mug!"

"You will see that this court examination doesn't come off so soon as was intended?"

"You can just bet your life I will!" with a genuine heartiness of manner.

"See that you do! If it will facilitate you in any way, you can mention my name to Judge Crowder."

"All right, maje."

"What others do you know as belonging to the Mafia?"

"Only such as this cowardly whelp has told me of in a general way."

"Who are they?"

"Well, for one thing, there's a regular organized section of the society work round as rock-blasters, or in whatever other rough employment where their secret vocation of a-sassins or bravos can command a price."

"Oh! And who is the head of the organization in this country?"

The shyder started at the question, and then looked around him guardedly before answering it.

"An awful man!" he replied, sinking his voice to a whisper; "one who is a chief lieutenant of the infernal gang at its fountain head in Naples, besides having kindred influence with every similar organization throughout this country and Europe!"

"Who is that?"

"The man whom you are doubtlessly trying to hunt down in that big diamond-murder case."

"Ah!"

"Yes, major; George Brookton, the Prince of the Strangers himself!"

"Well, I merely want to test your knowledge on

the subject. What else has Giuseppe revealed to you?"

"Really, little or nothing more."

"Nothing as to a certain Madame Vasquez?"

"Hullo!" and Mr. Finnerty scratched his head as if flushed with a sudden idea; "that must be the foreign old girl, with the green parrot, what way-laid me in the hotel when I had been looking for you?"

"The same. Don't pretend a surprise in the matter which you cannot possibly feel."

"Well, I'll be above-board, maje."

"See that you are!"

"I did chin the old girl about Mounseer Ackilly a bit, having learned from Giuseppe that she was something of a friend of his."

"What does he know of her?"

"I'm blessed if I believe he knows much more than I do!"

"How much is that?"

"Simply that she's a scaly old duck—probably a big criminal's moll putting on high and mighty style."

"How much did she get out of you concerning Monsieur Flameaux?"

"No more than I had been able to get out of Giuseppe—that the mounseer might be somebody other than he altogether seemed."

"No more than that?"

"Not a bit in reality, though, of course, I tried to make myself out jest ready to bust with secret information worth while for her to know."

"Ah!"

"That wasn't out of regular biz, now, maje. I was merely fishing for a stake, you know."

"Which, perhaps, you didn't get?"

"Not a brass *audi*! However, she appointed for me to drop in on her again this evening."

"Which you won't do!"

"Certainly not, maje, if you wish it that way."

"I do wish it."

"Up and up's the word."

"You will defer that court examination set down for to-morrow."

"Trust me for that."

"All right. And this may be more in your pocket, Jake, than you would have picked up to my disadvantage. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

HERR VAN NESS'S VISIT.

FALCONBRIDGE separated from Mr. Lawyer Finnerty in perfect confidence that the latter would keep faith with him, and all together fairly well satisfied with the interview.

Upon presenting himself thereafter in Mlle. Gersacht's apartments, it was to find that Herr Van Ness had already arrived and introduced himself.

"Ah! here you are again, Monsieur Flameaux?" cried the fat little man genially, and he glanced from one to another of the handsome young couple.

"And to think that you are presently to carry to the altar this tall and charming young vrain-lein whom I knew so well in short clothes when she was no more than so high!" and he held his hand at a ridiculously short height above the carpet, with his pleasant laugh. "A prize, *noucher*, a prize! And you are blonde while she is brunette. So much the better!"

Both Leah and her lover joined in the gentleman's pleasantly bantering mood, while Justine, who was setting out a table in the rear end of the large room, kept a perfectly indifferent countenance, though doubtless not unaware that the merchant's eye, which seemed to have a decided penchant for pretty women, had more than once rested approvingly upon herself.

A moment later, Madame Vasquez, looking her grandest in an expensive silk and a huge turban-like capillary edifice, and with her interminable parrot on her shoulder, entered, and was introduced.

Herr Van Ness's critical glance seemed to comprehend the stately adventuress from head to foot, silks, lace, finger-rings and all, in a single instant, and then, having understood that she was Spanish, he at once began to chat with her in that tongue as readily as to the manner born.

"Esteemed madame," said he, at last, "what part of Spain, may I ask, has the honor of your nativity?"

The senora had been very circumspect in her talk, and she did not seem to be wholly at her ease with this bright-eyed, sparkling little man of the world, whose alertness and vivacity seemed at such a variance with the typical Holland character.

"Castile, senor," she responded, a little reluctantly it seemed.

"Ah! and you must have quitted your native Castile at an early age, I infer, esteemed madame."

"Why should you infer that, senor?"

"From your accent, esteemed madame. Mind," with his expansive smile, "I say nothing as to its purity—in a certain way. But still it is not the perfect Castilian, which is to Spain what the Parisian is to France."

Madame Vasquez sighed.

"You are right, senor," she murmured, "Castilian by birth, and of the bluest blood, fate tore me from my native land at an early age, the greatest part of my life having been spent in Mexico and the Brazils."

"Ah, that explains it."

And Herr Van Ness was growing charmingly loquacious in a general way, when he was suddenly interrupted by a tremendous squawk from the parrot, followed by a string of blasphemous profanity, in half a dozen languages jumbled together, which was simply outrageous.

But the little fat gentleman was quite equal to the occasion.

Scarcely pausing in his talk, he snatched the bird from its perch, tucked its head under its wing, whirled it slowly around and around in the air until it was fast asleep, and then laid it on top of the piano, where it remained slumbering.

"Little birds should be seen, not heard," he smilingly observed, in response to the Senora's rather indignant glance. "Never seen that done before? Bless you!" including Leah and Achille in his remarks with his gesture; "a trick worth knowing. Used to be a sea-captain in my younger days, you must understand—among the Javas and Sumatra-wise."

"Parrots by the thousands—billions—as plentiful as the monkeys themselves.

"Not these nasty green little Brazilian brutes, like your charming pet, esteemed madame; but gray-bodied, blue-headed, with roses under their wings.

"Cockatoos, too—all colors of the rainbow, with a squawk like an earthquake, and a strength of beak that might break even one of your fingers, esteemed madame, muscular as they have the appearance of being!

"Ach! We used to put them asleep just in this way, but only after stuffing their crops with spiced porridge, like so many pudding-bags.

"That was to fatten them for the baking under the ship-cook's pie-crust, you must understand.

"Parrot pie! a dish for the gods—or at least for the sea-gods, who are nothing more nor less than the brave ship-captains, after all.

"My friends, it is ambrosial! Perhaps you never tasted of the delicacy, esteemed madame?"

No; with a frown of annoyance, 'esteemed madame' couldn't say that she ever had. She apparently didn't even choose to consider her beloved Pompo in a pastry connection; though she seemed contented to let him remain in his artificial somnolence, while furtively observing in the mean time, the entertaining Her Van Ness quite as critically as he was studying herself.

Then Her Van Ness gradually returned to an exciting topic which he had been engaged in discussing, or trying to discuss with Mme. Gersacht prior to her lover's arrival.

It was the thrilling and tragic adventure of the afternoon, which had happened just in time for the reporters of the evening newspapers to dish up for their readers, with such graphic and highly-colored details as are often, in lack of sounder foundation, a standing tribute to their imaginative fertility.

In fact, Mlle. Gersacht had already been compelled to peremptorily refuse all communication with those useful and persistent news-gatherers, who had besieged her rooms in hordes directly following upon the adventure, while monsieur Achille had thus far only saved himself from like annoyance by leaving a detailed version of the affair with the hotel clerk, and then keeping out of sight as much as possible.

"To think of it!" exclaimed Herr Van Ness, returning to the subject with enthusiasm. "Ah! you may boast of your freedom here in America, but where is the enforcement of your laws? We are so old-fashioned in Holland as to retain our king, it is true (though the poor gentleman seems to be on his last legs, by the latest reports), but such an outrageous robbery would be impossible in Amsterdam or The Hague."

"It wouldn't be impossible in Paris or London, though, mynheer," said Monsieur Achille. "Pardieu! what were any laws opposed to the desperadoes of the Mafia?"

"The Mafia! Bless me! was it the work of that infernal organization?"

"From certain experiences of mine with members of that order in Paris," and the detective's eyes were fastened upon Madame Vasquez, who was betraying fresh signs of uneasiness, "I haven't a doubt of it."

"The deuce! it is too bad—in this age of civilization, too. But, monsieur, your prowess was highly creditable—heroic, in fact. Ha! one scoundrel killed outright, another wounded to the death, and others *hors au combat*. I should say so! I should say so!"

"To what good?" with bitter dejectedness. "Were not mademoiselle's diamonds taken all the same? Fifty thousand dollars' worth—almost her entire inheritance!"

At the mention of the diamonds, which the newspaper accounts had already made conspicuous, Herr Van Ness's black little eyes emitted a business-like sparkle.

"Aha! Joseph Isaacstein's private venture," he exclaimed. "To think of those only being saved from the Thug King—while our poor firm's twinklers fell so easily into his murderous maw—to be captured by such ignorant bravos at last!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE ADVENTURE ON THE RACK.

"IGNORANT bravos, even of the dreaded Mafia," said Monsieur Achille, impressively, "never carry out such plots without profoundly intellectual criminal direction and guidance. I believe the Thug King was as much concerned in this last robbery as in the first!"

His eyes were prudently elsewhere, or apparently so, as Madame Vasquez shot a swift, startled look in his direction, only to recover her composure almost instantly.

"Donder und Blitzen!" cried the Dutch merchant; "can you entertain such an opinion, monsieur?"

"Decidedly!"

"But your grounds for it?"

"*Eh bien!* you see the Mafia-connection has been claimed for him by the police authorities of Paris and Naples, for one thing. But, most of all, this plot, in the ingenuity, divination and prescience implied in its conception at least, could have originated in no brain short of that master-criminal's. Listen, my friends."

And then, as if in a sudden gush of confidence, he related the details of the *ruse* enacted by Mlle. Gersacht and himself in the hope to foil possible felonious attempts, and which had proved so dimly and unaccountably ineffectual in the event.

Notwithstanding that this account was most adroitly given, and with the most delicate *finesse*, it left Leah blushing painfully, after she had gesticulated in vain to prevent the narration.

"Nonsense my dear Leah!" said her lover, turning to her with a grave smile, after finishing his recital, with the accompanying inferences in support of his theory; "are we not among friends?" with a tenderly comprehensive gesture, that included the demure Justine no less than the now thoroughly composed senora. "And why should I abstain from a thorough *exposé* of our extraordinary yet defeated precautions, to prove my claim that *le Monarque des Etrangleurs*, and he only, could have been the *deus ex machina* of the infernal plot by which we lost your diamonds and almost our lives into the bargain?"

"Still, *mon cher Achille*," murmured Leah, looking down, "my share in those precautions—Ah, ciel! if those reporters should get hold of that!"

"But they will not, my child, depend upon it!" genially interposed Herr Van Ness. "Put your fears to bed and asleep, my dear. Are we not, as Monsieur Flameaux says, wholly among friends and mutual well-wishers?"

"It is all very awful!" observed Madame Vasquez, trying to render the finger-rings on her large white hands as inconspicuous as possible as she perceived the merchant to be critically observing them.

"But, from what I have heard and read, I don't believe the Thug King could have had any more to do with the affair than—I myself, for that matter." With a shrug of her massive shoulders and one of her distorted smiles.

"Monsieur Flameaux" only looked at her with a natural surprise.

"And why, belle madame, do you so scornfully oppose my little theory, permit me to ask?" he said.

"Oh!" with a nervously forgetful gesture that brought the diamond flashes of her left hand prominently in view; "to elucidate my objections to your theory, monsieur, it would take too long. Perhaps I simply feel instinctively that you are in the wrong."

Here, with a little cry of admiration, the eccentric Herr Van Ness suddenly pounced upon Madame Van Ness's hand, good-naturedly imprisoning it while he devoured its ring-settings with the earnestness of a connoisseur and a professional.

"Ah, but you must excuse my enthusiasm, esteemed madame!" he exclaimed. "Diamonds! they are my worship, as are the beauties of nature to the poet, the stars to the rhapsodist. And these—and these of yours, how beautiful they are, and for the most part of unimpeachable first-water. Ha! this large stone especially—humph!"

And, with a peculiarly disconcerting glance up into the wearer's half-angry eyes, he suddenly resumed his seat in silence.

Madame Vasquez had angrily snatched away her hand, and now sat, gloomy and forbidding, with folded arms, while both Leah and the detective were equally puzzled by the guest's sudden and noticeable change of manner.

But Justine now announced that the *petite soupe* was in readiness, and, as they all arose, Herr Van Ness, with a sudden recovery of his vivacity, sought to make amends to the senora by offering to conduct her to the table with one of his most amiable smiles.

The supper was a success.

"You have a piano!" pleasantly remarked the guest of the evening when the repast was finished.

"Ah, a Knabe! But, of course, you have not played of late, my child," with a pitying look for Leah, who, though an excellent and devoted performer, had not thought of touching the instrument since her tragic bereavement. "Ah!" while lifting the cover, and skillfully running over the scale; "in fair tune also."

And then he settled himself unobtrusively before the keyboard, and both surprised and delighted his hearers with piece after piece of delicious and difficult music, splendidly performed and with a master-touch.

"Why, what is there that you can't do to perfection, mynheer?" exclaimed the detective, Leah's face being likewise expressive of her pleasure as the musician at last lapsed into some disconnected but dreamily pretty improvisations. "You can talk charmingly, you can be grave and gay by happy turns, you are a *raconteur*, you—you can mesmerize parrots, and you now cap the climax of your surprises by affording us some of the best music I, for one, have heard for months!"

Even Madame Vasquez had become interested, while Justine, in the act of clearing off the table at the other end of the room, looked more or less entranced.

Herr Van Ness shrugged his shoulders, and made a departing gesture with his fat little hands.

"Ach! you would overwhelm me, monsieur," he said, with becoming modesty. "However, a bad practice, my friends, this playing by ear. Now, with some really good music before me, I might do myself some reackredit."

"I have some of Chopin's and Strauss's," cried Mademoiselle Gersacht, eagerly. "Justine, just at the side of my dressing-case, in the middle room."

"The very thing!" cried Herr Van Ness, enthusiastically. "What! Chopin, the dreamer, Strauss, the magician! What more could be asked?"

The music was accordingly produced, and the diletante diamond-merchant lost no time in making a selection, and beginning to play it with exquisite skill and feeling.

Suddenly a discord made itself apparent, however, and he paused with a frown.

"A typographical error—more than one!" he exclaimed, studying the sheet. "Monsieur, a pencil, if you please? An alteration or two, and it is corrected."

But as the detective leaned over him, after providing the lead-pencil, the musician, instead of correcting the note (which, in fact, stood in no such need), wrote rapidly on the corner of the sheet, which he tore off, unperceived by any one else, and pressed into the other's palm, together with the return of the pencil.

"Ah! that is better; now we shall get along," and he once more plunged into the performance with renewed energy and skill.

"The old she-griffin! No more Spanish than you or I, and one of her ring-settings, which I examined, is a choice diamond of the invoice which cost Joseph Isaacstein his life. Take your measures accordingly. I shall remain here till late, to be of assistance in case of need."

This was the secret communication which Herr Van Ness had passed to the disguised detective.

The latter had hardly succeeded in deciphering it unperceived, when the ornolu clock on the mantelpiece rung out the hour of eleven.

Before the silvery tones had ceased, Justine, who had set the room to rights, gave Falconbridge an expressive look, half-entreaty, half-command, and abruptly quitted the room by the rear communicating doors.

The detective caught Leah's eye, which said:

"Yes, go!" and immediately followed the maid's example, with a muttered excuse, though by the private hall-door, while the merchant remained immersed in his music.

Somehow or other, Falconbridge felt that a *dénouement*, for good or ill, was at hand.

CHAPTER XLV.

JUSTINE'S BOLD GAME.

THE detective hurriedly reached the narrow and little-frequented corridor in the vicinity of his room-door.

But Justine was already before him at the rendezvous, her beautiful face wearing a peculiarly wise and yet resolved look in the insufficient light afforded by a single gas-jet from the main passage, nearly a hundred feet distant, her prettily-slipped foot impatiently tapping the floor.

"Well?" demanded the detective.

"Ah!" satirically; "so you can keep an appointment, after all?"

"I never purposely failed to keep one, once made."

"Monsieur!"

"Well, Justine!"

She suddenly stretched out her arms to him with a passionate gesture.

"I love you!" she cried, in a strangely-choking, half-muffled voice. "Heaven and earth! can't you see how I love you?"

Falconbridge recoiled in mingled embarrassment and confusion.

If he had anticipated, or sought to be prepared, for anything of this sort, the sudden passionateness and wild *abandon* of the declaration, even apart from the young woman's beauty—which was, nevertheless, little less than glorious at this flushing moment—would none the less have disconcerted him.

But his anger came to his aid.

"This is worse than madness—or duplicity gone wild!" he said, contemptuously.

"Madness, if you will!" she panted, her bosom rising and falling tumultuously, her face and eyes shining with an emotion that was assuredly not assumed; "but not duplicity, on your peril!"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply what I have had the immodesty, the madness to declare! With indescribable excitement. 'Immodesty? A breath, a word, a conventionality, a chain, in comparison with the ardor and the passion of a woman's heart!'"

"Look here, Justine, this won't do!" said the detective, with stern impatience. "You promised me, as a bait for my keeping this appointment, to acquaint me with the secret of Madame Vasquez's connection with the Thug King."

She seemed to partly control herself by a vast effort.

"You only remember half-right," she said. "That, or something else equally startling, was what I promised to divulge, Achille."

"So it was!" he admitted, with no little discontent.

She smiled—a terrible, a cunning, and yet a beautiful smile, inasmuch as her ripe, perfect lips would have scarcely been capable of an unattractive one.

"However, do not repine, my friend," she said, with mock pity. "Say to me what you may surmise the senora's secret to be, and I pledge my honor to inform you whether you shall have hit the mark or not—whether you are hot or cold, as the children say at their hide-the-slipper. I will do that much."

"But no more?"

"On that point, no; that is, I think not at present."

"I shall make a virtue of necessity, then."

"A Spartan virtue, monsieur—commendable, but inexorable!"

"*Eh bien!* I take her, then, to be some whilom mistress and confederate of *le Monarque des Etrangleurs*, still vigilant and alert in his interests, and as to his security."

She smiled again.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Warm, rather than cold, but scarcely hot!"

"Am I right or wrong?"

"Wrong," after a pause.

"This on your honor?"

"On my honor!" with a prompt earnestness that was not to be questioned.

"I'll try another guess," gloomily.

"A hundred, if you choose; but I shall respond truthfully to no more—on that point."

"No?"

"Upon none more!"

Disappointed and half-furious, Falconbridge still controlled his temper to a certain degree.

"What, then," he demanded, "is the 'something else equally startling'—the other secret—you promised for me?"

"Your own."

"My own?" he repeated, mystified.

The girl laughed.

"Why, of course, *Falconbridge!*" she replied, mockingly. And then, as he started back, fairly taken by surprise, she added: "How doltishly man-like in you to imagine that I did not penetrate your disguise from the first, perfect as it has been of its kind!"

He stared.

"You did?" he faltered.

"From the first. With but one exception in the world, no man can so perfectly disguise his personality as to be impenetrable—it takes a woman for that; and with the eyes of love on the lookout—jealous love at that, as mine for you—even the single exception could not exist."

The detective had not quite recovered from his sense of mortification and chagrin. Justine's veracity could scarcely be doubted on this point; and yet if she had both known and kept his secret from the first, why—

"How is it with the senora?" he demanded, with precipitation.

"You have succeeded with her. Incredible as it seems to my understanding, you have thoroughly hoodwinked her up to within a few hours ago; and even as yet, though she may suspect you to be other than you are, she cannot have the ghost of a suspicion as to *whom* you are. She still imagines you to have been blown away by the rock-blast, as contrived by your arch-enemy, the Thug King."

"And yet you have known my secret and kept it from her—your confederate?"

"Falconbridge, I have; and thereby been guilty of a faithlessness, a treachery that you cannot conceive of, in view of your ignorance of the nature of the tie that binds, or should bind, that person and me!"

"Heavens! can you be the woman's daughter?"

"I am not the woman's daughter."

He now hesitated, knowing that his next natural question must be the one she most desired to answer in her own way.

She seemed to divine his prudential hesitancy, and a great sadness came into her face, softening and intensifying its dazzling fairness and beauty.

"Falconbridge," she continued, "at any time during these past weeks—during your assumption of this polite but vapid character—so different from the black-haired, swarthy and piercing-eyed manliness that so won upon my heart at first sight—a word, a whisper from me would have launched upon your unsuspecting life a vengeance deadly as the lightning-bolt."

"Your keenest vigilance and most heroic dauntlessness would have availed you no more than a handful of dry leaves in the whirlwind's path."

"As it was, from the very first you have been nearer death than you can conceive of."

"A whisper of your secret from my lips in the ear of one, whose confidence I have not hesitated to betray for your sake, would have been your doom."

"In the glare of noon, or in the dead of night, it would have found you out!"

"I was dumb, love conquered duty, my lips were sealed, and you were saved!"

He still remained listening, motionless, in silence.

"Falconbridge," she continued, after a moment's waiting, "surely now you will not charge with me dissimulation—at least to you?"

The man felt badgered, exasperated, beset, grateful—he knew not what else.

He stamped his foot, and something like a short, bitter oath issued from between his teeth.

"No, not that again, Justine, by Heaven!" he hoarsely muttered.

"Thank you! But you do not know all, and justice to myself requires that you should know all."

"A hundred times I have been tempted to give you up to death—to stand no longer between you and your doom. Why? A few words will explain it to you. I have but an angry patience, Falconbridge, and, besides loving you to madness, I was and am insanely jealous of Mademoiselle Gersacht. Need I say more?"

"No." The allusion to Leah had suddenly aroused him out of his cruel embarrassment, though he still felt himself all but inextricably in the toils. "Justine, don't think me an ingrate or a brute. I am neither. If you love me, it is perhaps my misfortune, even more than yours—in that such peerless loveliness and womanhood must go a-begging. But I love my betrothed wife, and her only, and—what more can be said?"

CHAPTER XLVI.

FORESHADOWINGS.

SHE had grown white, her eyes downcast, her lips quivering.

"But all that was only in your masquerade!" she murmured, eagerly. "It is only in keeping with your character of Monsieur Achiles Flameaux that you have been acting the part of Mademoiselle Gersacht's fiancé, though—though even that has caused me untold torments of jealousy."

"Justine," and though his voice was measurably firm, for the life of him he could not face her, "it is acting no longer."

She recoiled, looking at him wildly, a new and hopeless fury in her mien.

"This is not true?" she gasped.

"It is the truth."

"Man, man! what would you tell me—what would you dare tell me?"

"The truth, Justine; and that is that it is no longer a masquerade—that it is I, John Falconbridge, and Leah Gersacht, who are irrevocably betrothed in honest love, heart to heart, forevermore, until at last, with God's blessing, we are united at the altar."

"Since when?" she demanded, huskily.

"Since this morning, formally."

She reeled back, clasping her temples with both hands.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she murmured; "I half-suspected it, and yet—Ah! when has not love and hope befooled the strongest judgment, the wariest cunning?"

Then she burst into a fierce, harsh laugh, her wrath transforming her.

"It shall never be!" she burst forth. "United at the altar? Never, while there is fire in this heart, resentment in this breast! I swear it!"

He drew himself up haughtily, not sorry, perhaps, for her rage, which was less perplexing to meet than her tenderness, backed by the embarrassing debt of gratitude that was undoubtedly her due from him.

"You are beside yourself!" he said. "Justine, don't sting me into forgetting what—what I should remember to your credit in my behalf."

"Man!" But it was the last flash of the first fiery outburst. Clasping her hands, the tears standing in her beautiful eyes, she was all tenderness, all supplication once more. "Oh, Falconbridge! is—do you find Leah more beautiful than I?"

"I love her, Justine."

"No, no, no! A passing fancy, pity, admiration, but not love! Reflect, Falconbridge!" with child-like eagerness. "She is dark, and so are you. The divine affinity of contrasts, of the fair loving the dark, the dark the fair, is not outborne. Nature itself is contradicted, set at defiance. You—you are naturally so dark, so bronzed, albeit with your falcon's gray and piercing eye, Falconbridge. And now study me well. Aha! am I brunette or blonde? Cannot you smile upon me, Falconbridge? See; a perfect blonde—and yet with my black eyes—the antitheses of yours!"

He checked himself in a gesture of weariness.

"Justine, I love Leah Gersacht," he said, doggedly.

"Tell me, Falconbridge, am I hideous or fair to look upon?"

"Have done, in common propriety, in—in womanly shame!"

"You hate me?"

"Not so; but I love Leah."

The fury was fast mastering her again, though she still held it in leash.

"You kissed me once, Falconbridge."

"Not so; it was you—but no matter. Have done, I beseech!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the hysterical fury at last. "How magnanimous in you, that catch of the tongue—not to say that it was I who performed the osculatory feat! Ha, ha, ha! True, none the less. And hark you, though it was at our initial acquaintance—though there was duplicity in me then, it was for the first and last and only time, Falconbridge. My love—my love for you, together with my treachery to that other—was in that first kiss born—not with trembling hintings, not with Cytherean beginnings and growings, but Minerva-like, full-grown and panoplied from toe to crown, new-risen from the Jovian brain."

He made an angrily impatient gesture.

Her mood changed from storm to deadliness, from emotional tempest to concentrated, quintessential rage—the white heat of fury.

She clutched him by the wrist.

"What!" she hissed; "you think I will permit it—that I will be scorned, and for her? Man! do you forget that you are in my power—that the fateful whisper of your secret may yet quit my indignant lips?"

This was true—he felt it; and yet, after a single instant's hesitation, he repulsed her.

"Do your worst!"

"You defy me?"

"I must, in my very manhood, in my self-respect, Justine, and—I do!"

"Go!" the pallor of a deadly calm had fallen upon her, and she was pointing with her hand. "Go—and fear!"

Without another word, he turned on his heel, and was gone, leaving her there in the duskiest like a Nemesis, or an avenging statue.

However, he felt that she was following him at a distance as he approached the door of Leah's private hall.

As he was about entering it, however, a softly sibilant yet thrilling "Hist!" reached his ear.

He slightly turned to perceive Tommy Dodd peering out of a neighboring alcove, a finger across his lips, his face expressive of a more portentous look than he had ever seen in it before.

Only partly comprehending, the detective nodded slightly, but entered the private hall with apparent indifference; where, however, he left a crack of the door still open after nearly closing it behind him, and peeped out.

As he did so a figure passed, with stealthy, cat-like steps, the recognition of which caused him something of a shock.

It was Giuseppe Malletto.

Then the detective saw it all, or thought he saw it all, in an instant.

Having escaped from prison, or effected his release in some way, the fellow was there, on his first impulse, to seek Madame Vasquez with his secret of the *pseudo*-Parisian's identity with the dead-alive Falconbridge.

"Of what consequence, if any?" thought the detective, on recovering from his first surprise. "Will not Justine hasten to forestall the wretch with the prime intelligence he imagines himself to be bringing for the Thug King's benefit?"

But when he looked out again after the Italian's retreating form, his astonishment was not only renewed, but redoubled.

What could it mean?

The fellow had stopped along up in the passage, and was inaudibly conversing with Justine!

And had not Tommy Dodd declared that Giuseppe, while more or less familiar with the senora, knew nothing of Justine—could not even 'place her'?

Mirabile visu!

After a noiseless, but highly gesticulative, exchange of words, they were retiring back together in the narrower and gloomy passage.

When they had disappeared, the detective glided over to Tommy's place of concealment.

"Let me have your nook here," he whispered peremptorily. Fetch Dick Pryor at once to lie in wait on the first staircase down, and give some preparatory hints."

CHAPTER XLVII.

SOLUTION.

TOMMY noiselessly stole away, with an intelligent nod, and Falconbridge, ensconced in the alcove, watched the entrance of the passage in which Justine and Giuseppe had disappeared with hungry curiosity.

Should he attempt to eavesdrop upon their conference?

No; too much risk of discovery.

Better wait—wait!

Meanwhile the splendid pianoforte music of Herr Van Ness was continuing uninterruptedly within.

Presently the two figures reappeared out of the gloomy passage into the broad, better lighted hall.

But a change had taken place in their demeanor to each other.

The Italian seemed both cringing and threatening; Justine erect, haughty, even contemptuous or derisive.

What could it mean?

At last, as if in response to some exceptionally beseeching gesture or whispered words on the man's part, she was seen to repel him by a fiercely disdainful movement.

"Fool—idiot!" were the hissing words from her lips that at last reached the detective's straining ear; "begone on your peril! He is my prey, my victim, not yours—a dish fit for the gods, not a carcass to be torn by despicable wretches such as you!"

Then she came noiselessly gliding down the passage, the man remaining, seemingly hopeless and desperate, in his place.

The detective shrunk back into his corner, still all eyes and ears.

Just, however, as Justine was about disappearing into Leah's private hall, the man came hurrying after at a noiseless run.

He called to her hoarsely by a certain name.

She turned furiously, with the face of a demoness—if anything so beautiful could be thus characterized—and, with a last scornful, repellent gesture, vanished, closing the door.

Giuseppe halted an instant, the picture of baffled hope, defeated purpose, and then slowly kept on his way in the direction of the staircase.

But that name by which he had addressed the young woman!

For a minute or two the Falcon Detective remained rooted in his place.

Dagmar!

Detective as he was, and with an enviable reputation in his line, hard-earned, slow-built, what a fool, what a purblind, unconscionable fool, what an egregious dupe, he had been!

Dagmar!

But there was revelation at last, the solution of the entire mystery rushing upon him like a storm. The next instant he was on the Italian's heels, with steps no less gliding and stealthy.

It would not do for those in Mlle. Gersacht's rooms to have an intimation as yet.

He waited till Giuseppe had descended the stairs to the first landing, and then spoke, through a manly repugnance to assaulting any ordinary man unawares.

The Italian turned with a start, his hand in his breast, but at that instant the detective downed him with a tiger spring, accompanied by a crushing blow.

In spite of the fellow's furious resistance, he was speedily mastered, with scarcely a disturbing sound, and then both Dick Pryor and Tommy Dodd, who had been in convenient hiding, were on hand.

"Quick!" whispered the detective; "cords and a gag! The alarm must not be given yet."

"Here you are, my hearty!" And Pryor forthwith produced the conveniences demanded.

In but little more time than it takes to tell it, Giuseppe was secured, gagged, and deposited in an empty bedroom near at hand.

Then, after a whispered conference with his companions, and the passing from Pryor's into Falconbridge's possession of a certain contrivance from time immemorial deemed an essential of police equipment, the latter led them to the door of Mlle. Gersacht's suite, and, leaving them on guard inside the private hall, entered the parlor, in which Herr Van Ness was still the active magician at the piano-forte.

Both Leah and Madame Vasquez were so absorbed as to only look up uncritically as the detective entered, though Justine, watchful and pale in one corner, threw him a swift, inquisitive glance.

The detective was perfectly composed, even smiling apologetically, as if in deprecation of a natural resentment over his prolonged absence from such charming company.

But, as Leah looked up at him, she caught a terrible look in her lover's eyes—a look meant for her alone, and which said for her almost as unmistakably as words themselves—"The crisis is here! Disappear for a space; it is not meet that you should witness it."

Madame Vasquez roused herself, and looked up inquiringly, while Herr Van Ness, ceasing with a melodious ripple along the keys, also turned his smiling but still absorbed face, as Leah quitted the room with as little abruptness as might be, and yet with a changed look.

Justine caught the alarm, and started forward with a short cry. But at the same instant Falconbridge precipitated himself upon the *pseudo*-senora like a thunderbolt, striking that august individual a terrific fist-blow behind the ear.

Herr Van Ness turned pale and was bewildered, but only for a moment.

"Madame Vasquez"—in other words, the woman-disguised Thug King—was up in an instant, with a shout and a sort of a roar, though still staggering under the blow, and with a pair of handcuffs already snapped upon the wrists.

"Girl, you must have betrayed me!" bellowed the monster, as Dagmar recoiled after her first forward spring. "Curses of hell! quick, your revolver!"

Then the detective was in his strangling grasp, and for an instant the struggle was tremendous.

But Dick Pryor and Tommy Dodd had sprung into the room, and, watching his chance, the former at last got in a crushing blow with his short locust club on Brookton's temple, knocking him down.

Then snap! there was an extra pair of irons on the redoubtable wrists; and, three minutes later, he was corded and bound as securely as a swathed, thousand-year-desiccated mummy; and an extraordinary spectacle he made, with his bloody forehead, his woman's wig awry, the cosmetics of his cunning make-up streaked with blood, his woman's gown and finery awry, the rings still glistening upon those terrible and until now indomitably murderous hands.

Pryor had completed the fullest preparations on the hints brought to him by Tommy Dodd.

A squad of four policemen were speedily on hand, and both the dreaded Thug King and Giuseppe Malletto were forthwith hurried off to durance vile.

When this had been done, Pryor pointed to Dagmar, who had remained standing by the piano like a statue.

"Anything to be done with her?" he asked of Falconbridge.

The latter shook his head peremptorily, and then, at a sign from him, both Pryor and Tommy quitted the place; while Herr Van Ness plumped himself into an easy-chair, with a muttered "Donder und blitzen! what next?"

Leah had come back into the room, looking like a ghost, but with her eyes fixed upon Dagmar with a forgiveness and even pity that were sublime.

"My sister!" she murmured, and then hesitatingly, timidly touched the rigid form.

The girl flung off the touch as if it had been a serpent's sting.

Then she confronted her whilom mistress with a withering look.

"You!" she exclaimed, in indescribable passion and despair. "What have you to complain of? Haven't you got him?"

She pointed to Falconbridge, who, by certain rapid manipulations, had discarded not only his blonde wig, but also in some mysterious way his fictitious complexion, apparently with quite as much ease as

he had disposed of the characteristic expression that had fitted it, and was now in his own proper personality before them.

"Alas!" murmured Leah; "I make no complaint, Dagmar."

The latter smiled glassily.

"True, you never did," she said, contemptuously. "You were ever, even as a child, of the cowardly, uncomplaining, silently-suffering sort."

Falconbridge sternly motioned her to silence.

"How dare you?" cried Dagmar. "You can despise my love, trample on my heart at will, of course!" with a pathos even in her bitterness; "but might not a whisper from my lips have consigned you unawares at any instant to my father's vengeance—into those strangling hands, invincible up to this fateful hour? You would forget that?"

"Dagmar, I forget nothing," said the detective, gently. "Ingratitude has never been rightly charged to me."

"Oh, but this is sad—sad!" plaintively interposed poor bewildered Mr. Van Ness, notwithstanding that the most of the situation was beyond his comprehension.

Dagmar passed her hand abstractedly across her brow.

"The diamonds—the stolen property!" she said, mechanically. "You will find all secreted in—in that other apartment; the fruits of the murder behind a loosened fire-brick as far up in the chimney, on the left, as you can reach; the other diamonds taken to day by the Mafia bravos at—at that man's directions, in one of the legs of the wash-stand, holloved out for their concealment."

The words were almost business-like in their undemonstrativeness, save for a dull weariness or despair of tone that was knell-like in its suggestive ness.

After a reassuring glance at Leah, Falconbridge signed to Herr Van Ness, and they quitted the room together; the latter with an agile and buoyant expectancy, as if scarcely believing the evidence of his senses.

"Oh! my son!" exclaimed the merchant in the Vasquez apartment, a few moments later; "it seems too good to be true. The promised reward is yours; it shall be paid over to you with as little delay as may be."

The search had been successful. The bag containing his firm's diamonds intact, which had cost Joseph Isaacstein his life, were in his hands, while Leah's gems were in the detective's possession.

When they returned, Leah was softly sobbing in a fauteuil, while Dagmar did not seem to have changed her statuesque attitude by the piano by so much as a hair's difference.

A glance at the two men seemed to satisfy her that the restitution was complete.

Then she once more passed her hand over her brow, and her thoughts seemed to be far away.

"Why did I not die before?" she murmured. "How I prayed for it in the lonely, deserted house there, when I thought the scratch of the Italian's dagger was my death-wound! But to have lived for what is past, for what is to come."

Her hand rose again, this time to her lips, and then fell heavily to her side.

Leah uttered a cry and sprang toward her, as a tiny vial rolled glisteningly along the carpet.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DENOUEMENT.

BUT Dagmar had already slowly sunk down to the floor.

"It is too late!" she murmured indifferently, as they gathered around her. "The poison is sure; I am beyond help."

Further nurse-help than Leah's, together with a physician, were hastily summoned; but Dagmar had but spoken truly.

She was beyond mortal help.

Half an hour later, when it was obvious that the end was near at hand, she lifted her beautiful hand slightly from the coverlet of Leah's bed, of which she had quickly become the compulsory occupant, as a sign that the physician and strange nurses should quit the room.

This was done, Leah alone remaining.

"Send for him!" murmured Dagmar. "That is," with a flutter of sarcasm on the fading lips, "if—if you won't be jealous."

Leah stepped to the communicating door without a word.

A moment later, Falconbridge was beside the dying girl.

She looked at him with spiritless, despairing eyes, which did not alter their expression even when he gently took her hand.

"I loved you!" she said, apathetically.

"Think not of these things now, Dagmar!" he implored.

"I loved you!"

"Shall I not bring a clergyman?"

A smile, or rather a soundless laugh, on the still perfect lips.

"I loved you!" she repeated.

"Dagmar, this is madness—fatuity!" said the detective, much agitated. "Place your thoughts upon God, in whose presence you are about to appear—your hopes in the Redeemer!"

Another smile, this time contemptuous and disgustful before it passed, leaving her calm and listless as before.

"I loved you!"

He made a gesture of despair, when something in the fading face seemed to appeal to him.

"What is it?" he gently asked.

She signed him to bend closer down, which he did. "It was I who kissed you," she said, almost inaudibly. "You never kissed me—you can always tell her that!"

He immediately kissed her forehead.

Dagmar tossed her arms, struggling to sit up, her face and eyes momentarily transfigured.

Then the lips were distorted, and, with a last little sigh, she fell back, and was lifeless clay.

Falconbridge led Leah back into the parlor, where Herr Van Ness had continued to remain, and took her in his arms upon the sofa, with her poor head upon his shoulder.

He had hardly done so when Tommy Dodd burst breathlessly into the room, his oldish little face the picture of exciting intelligence in store.

"Cheated the gallows, boss!" he blurted out; and then, comprehending something of the situation, hung his head.

Leah looked up with sudden energy.

"Speak right out!" she commanded. "What is it you would say? I insist!"

Falconbridge nodded.

"Thug King's dead!" said Tommy.

"Explain!"

"He broke out of the coach, after nearly killing the three cops having him in charge."

"Go on."

"But Dick Pryor was on the box with the driver."

"Well?"

"Dick landed a bullet in his heart."

It was true.

Our story has drawn to a close, but a few words remaining to be said.

The death of both Brookton and his daughter still left much of the former's extraordinarily successful methods—especially his genius for disguises, and the seemingly superhuman divination into an enemy's plans and purposes—as much of a mystery as ever; and the solution thereof, if any, must be left to the analytical and deductive genius who shall feel disposed to devote his time and patience to the task.

Three of the Mafia conspirators were in good time brought to justice for participating in the second diamond robbery, and received exemplary sentences.

Giuseppi was brought to trial only on the charge of circulating base money, and, on prompt conviction, was sent on a ten years' sentence to Auburn State Prison, where he still remains.

His wife continued to be befriended by Leah, and is now the proprietress of a flourishing little candy and fruit store, next door to that of Monsieur Morbeau, the genial and France-loving Alsatian tobaccoist, whose patriotic hatred of Bismarck remains in undiminished fervor and virulence, even if not to the serious alarm or discomfort of the adamantine exponent of blood and iron in European map-making.

Falconbridge and Leah were happily married a few months following upon the tragic occurrences which have lent an undesired but necessary luridness to our denouement, and at once set out upon a prolonged wedding tour.

The irrepressible Tommy Dodd is still flourishing, as he deserves to be, and one of his new possessions is a squawky and otherwise obstreperous green parrot, answering still to the name of Pompo.

THE END.

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